

# OTAKU USA

ANIME | MANGA | GAMING

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SAMURAI  
BLACK  
PARADOX**

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KATSUYA  
TERADA**

**YA BOY  
KONGMING!**

**BLAST FROM THE PAST!**

**MANGA  
REVIEWS**

**SPRIGGAN  
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**YUKI YUNA IS A HERO  
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### FEATURES

- 72 THE SHOW MUST GO ON!**  
*Revue Starlight* has all the lights, camera, and action to pull off a performance to rival Broadway.
- 78 HIGH ADVENTURE!**  
An old-school anime action icon returns in *Spriggan*.
- 82 BLAST FROM THE PAST!**  
*Ya Boy Kongming!* is an anime that crosses time and space to take a satirical look at modern Japan.
- 86 ALL TOGETHER NOW**  
*Yuki Yuna is a Hero* is an anime that turns everything you know about magical girls upside down.

### DEPARTMENTS

- 6 Editorial**
- 8 Letters**
- 10 Otaku Arsenal**  
Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle



#### Manga Previews

- 39 BLACK PARADOX**  
Exclusive preview from Viz Media
- 55 AFRO SAMURAI**  
Exclusive preview from Titan Manga
- 92 Tokyoscope**  
Mighty Godzilla Hammer
- 102 Cosplay USA**  
A Look Back!
- 106 Owari**  
A More Creative World



### DIRECT FROM JAPAN

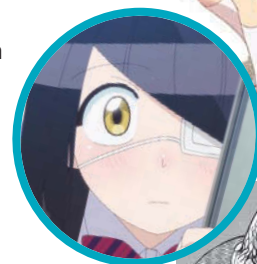
#### ANIME REVIEWS

- 14** Komi Can't Communicate
- 16** Dance Dance Danseur
- 18** Sakura Trick-Complete Collection
- 20** Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie
- 20** Initial D: First Stage
- 22** Yuki Yuna is a Hero
- 24** Orient



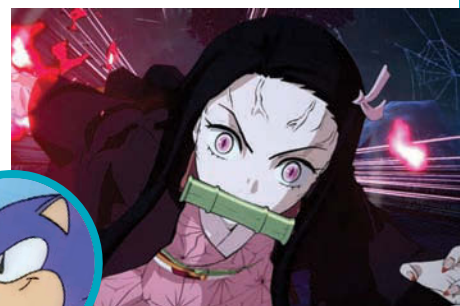
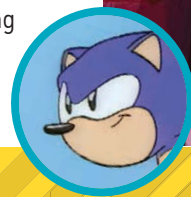
#### MANGA REVIEWS

- 26** Yashahime: Princess Half-Demon
- 27** This Onmyoji is Bad News
- 27** Bleach 20th Anniversary Edition
- 28** Stalemate
- 29** Professor Strangelove
- 29** Black Paradox
- 30** The (Pet) Detective Agency
- 30** Afro Samurai
- 31** Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World TRPG
- 31** Cowboy Bebop: Supernova Swing
- 32** The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic: The Manga Companion
- 32** The Art and Making of Transformers: War for Cybertron Trilogy
- 33** Wolf and Little BL Red Hood
- 33** Crazy Food Truck
- 34** Rooster Fighter
- 35** Look Back
- 35** Thus Spoke Rohan Kishibe
- 36** Under Ninja



#### GAME REVIEWS

- 96** Sonic Origins
- 97** Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak
- 98** Demon Slayer: The Hinokami Chronicles (Switch)
- 98** OPUS: Echo of Starsong
- 100** The Quarry
- 100** DNF Duel





## ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

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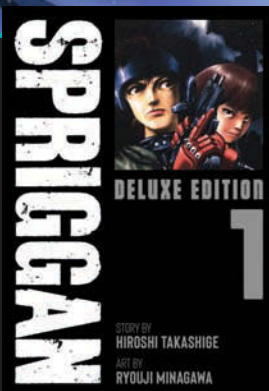


### REVUE STARLIGHT

What else has been going on in the world of anime idols? Read the latest at [www.otakuusamagazine.com](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com)!

### SPRIGGAN

The original manga is back in print, and you can read all about it at [www.otakuusamagazine.com](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com)!



### YA BOY KONGMING

Just how popular is the theme song for Ya Boy Kongming!? Find out at [www.otakuusamagazine.com](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com)!



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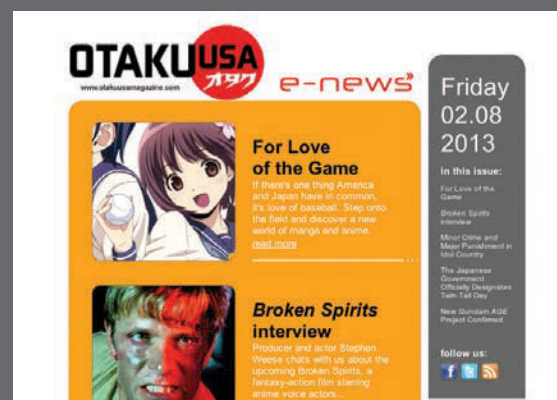


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**Carl A. Gnam, Jr.**  
Editorial Director

**Patrick Macias**  
Editor in Chief

**Joseph Luster**  
Editor/Games & Website

**Shaenon K. Garrity**  
Editor/Manga

**Samantha DeTulio**  
Art Director

**Contributors:**

Ani-Mia, Jules L. Carrozza, Paul Thomas Chapman, Kara Dennison, David Estrella, Brianna Fox-Priest, Che Gilson, Michael Goldstein, Robert L. McCarthy, Daryl Surat, Jason Bradley Thompson, Danny "Ruggles" Tanner, Brittany Vincent

**Design Contributor**  
Dawn Stein

**Production Assistant**  
Julian Gnam

**Advertising Office**  
**Diane Hintz**  
Advertising Director  
(703) 964-0361

**Ben Boyles**  
Account Executive  
(570) 322-7848, Ext. 130  
benjaminb@sovhomestead.com

**Linda Galliher**  
Ad Coordinator  
570-322-7848, ext. 160  
lgalliher@sovmmedia.com

**Mark Hintz**  
Chief Executive Officer

**Robin Lee**  
Bookkeeper

**Subscription Customer Service**  
(800) 219-1187  
sovereign@publishersserviceassociates.com

**Comag Marketing Group**  
Worldwide Distribution

**Sovereign Media Company, Inc.**  
6731 Whittier Avenue, C-100, McLean, VA 22101  
(703) 964-0361

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(800) 219-1187

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## editorial

### Unicorns in the Sea

Hey, this is Patrick and hey, welcome to the new issue of Otaku USA magazine! 16 years and running as the last standing print periodical on the rack devoted heart and soul to anime, manga, games, cosplay, rubber monsters, you name it, whatever we can get from the Land of the Rising Fun.... JAPAN!

So what do we have in store for you this time? Well... writer Daryl Surat puts on his high tech muscle suit and uses his augmented strength to whip up a feature on the latest anime incarnation of *Spriggan*. Up next, Michael Goldstein invites us to the theater with a pair of box seat ticket for his two cents on *Revue Starlight*. Suddenly, Brittany Vincent pops out of nowhere and transports us to a mysterious forest where she shares her thoughts on *Yuki Yuna is a Hero* with us. Finally, Michael Goldstein appears from the year 234 AD with a cool robe and moustache just in the nick of time to tell us all about *Ya Boy Kongming!*

In between these big sprawling features, you'll find our regular departments and columns including cosplay, games, manga samples, manga reviews, and even a Mighty Peking Man!

So what else is going on? Well, right now as I sit writing this, it's early August in Tokyo. This is traditionally the hottest time of year, and the 'ol weatherman isn't fooling around this time as Japan is seeing record breaking temperatures day after day. You can't blame me for hiding inside my air-conditioned room and coming out only to run to the convenience store for yet another delicious tub of chocomint ice cream.

I'm working on a new book! But it hasn't been announced yet, so I can't say what it

is (hint: it's about anime!) and I am taking notes on a few fiction projects, but mostly I am waiting to beat the heat (or to just go away) before I can run around to my favorite spots in Tokyo: Shibuya, Akihabara, the ramen shop (it's too hot to eat ramen!).

Convention seems like it's wrapping up back in the USA, and it was fun to see pictures online of folks heading back to cons like Anime Expo, Anime Weekend Atlanta, and Otakon. Another live event I wish I could have attended was the 40th anniversary screening of *The Last Unicorn* held at the Academy Museum in LA in late July. If you've never seen *The Last Unicorn* before, you really need to fix that! It's a gorgeous animated fantasy movie that was brought to life by Studio Topcraft in Japan, composed of some of the same team who would go on to work with Hayao Miyazaki at Studio Ghibli. I confess that I am now old enough to have seen *The Last Unicorn* in the movie theaters when it came out in 1982 and it has stuck with me ever since. Maybe it will work some magic on you as well?

In the meantime, enjoy the new issue of Otaku USA magazine!

—Patrick





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# LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hi Otaku USA!

I've been an avid reader of your magazine for the last two years because I just love your coverage of series and shows I would have never discovered otherwise. However, as a die-hard fan of *The Quintessential Quintuplets*, I can't help but sit here in envy of those in Japan getting to experience the new movie release first hand. Is there any chance we might get some QQ related coverage in the near future? As always keep up the amazing work and I can't wait for what future editions of the magazine have for us!

—Ruben

**Hi Ruben! Thanks so much for your letter and for giving us your seal of approval on our *Quintessential Quintuplets* coverage (Did that rhyme? I'd like to think so). We don't have plans for a feature on the new film, but can promise that we certainly will prioritize such a thing when the *Quintessential Quintuplets* movie gets a proper**



**North American release (after all, we are Otaku USA!). In the meantime, please enjoy a picture from ... if not your favorite anime ... then one you are a die-hard fan of ... *The Quintessential Quintuplets*!**

Hi Otaku USA!! My friends and I love to draw and make comics, and I thought it would be a cool idea to start a magazine! (The working title is Weeb Jump.) I thought I'd ask you guys how you got started! It's been 16 years since you guys first started publishing so I gather you guys are doing a lot of things right.

First question: how do I start? Your first issue looked really professional and put together. Do you guys use a specific template? Also, who does the graphic design work? They do an amazing job!

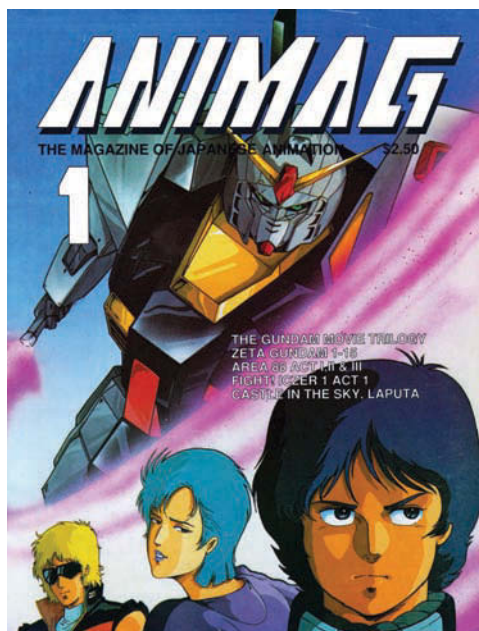
I think those are all the questions I have right now, but there's probably more. With your help, and with some YouTube videos, I'll be set! Looking forward to hearing from you!

—Maya

**Hi Maya! Thanks for your letter and thanks so much for reading our magazine! That is great that you want to make your own publication. We say... GO FOR IT! While we don't have enough space here to really go thick on the details of our nuts and bolts, there is an article we did for our 10th anniversary of *Otaku USA* that basically reveals our origin story and some of our working habits. You can find it over at our official website [OtakuUSAmagazine.com](http://OtakuUSAmagazine.com).**

**We are also super happy you enjoy the great work from our graphic designer Samantha. You can't go wrong with someone like that on your team!**

**And since we are talking about magazines, I'm going to share a picture of the first professionally printed US anime magazine I ever saw: *Animag* #1 from 1987. If we can do it, you can too!**



Hi Otaku USA! I love your magazine and have one little suggestion, it would greatly help people like me if you named the character and the cosplayer in your photos. I enjoy looking at them but often don't know which character I'm supposed to be seeing, also if I knew the cosplayers name, I might just follow them on social media. Keep up the good work, especially the manga reviews and previews!

—Al

**Hi Al! Thanks for your message and for enjoying our magazine! Our cosplay columnist AniMia is off this month enjoying her first break from our pages in 7 years, but I'll pass on this letter to her when she's back and let's see**



**what she says! In the meantime, did you know we published a one-shot cosplay issue a few years back? *Cosplay USA* had more info on individual characters and cosplayers and might be closer to what you are looking for. Some issues can still be found out there in the wild, and you can also score a digital version from our official web store! Poke around at [OtakuUSAmagazine.com](http://OtakuUSAmagazine.com). It's there, we swear!**

**And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to [otakuusa@gmail.com](mailto:otakuusa@gmail.com)!**



# Journey Back to Burlone.



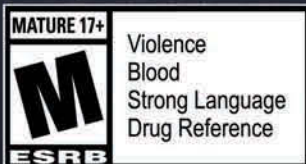
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# Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

## Lady Dimitrescu Statue Towers Over the Competition

If you're looking for a statue that will make a serious impression on your shelf, PureArts has you all set thanks to a new 1/4 scale likeness of Lady Dimitrescu from *Resident Evil Village*. Coming within a hair's breadth of her Freddy-like blades was one of the heart-pounding highlights of the game, and now she can be yours in two editions at an equally imposing price point.



Lady Dimitrescu is available in both an Exclusive Edition—which is limited to just 100 units and comes with a Dimitrescu Metal Key Replica—and a Standard Edition limited to a perfect 666 units. Worldwide shipping is currently expected in Q3 2023, and owning this large lady will run you \$1,499.



© CAPCOM



## Chainsaw Man Jewelry Cuts to the Heart

Jewelry brand Tasaki recently revealed a new collaboration with Tatsuki Fujimoto's hit manga *Chainsaw Man*, which is soon to be an anime adaptation, and the results are both sharp and expensive. Look, all we're saying is Denji *definitely* couldn't even afford to look at these, much less buy them!

Prices for the jewelry—which range from a Chainsaw Man gold



pendant to a Power yellow gold necklace and Chainsaw Man white gold diamond pendant—start around ¥187,000, which adds up to about \$1,362. Items from the collaboration with Tasaki's Danger collection are limited to one per customer, and went up for sale in pop-up stores throughout Japan this past June.

© Tatsuki Fujimoto  
© Tasaki



## SPY x FAMILY Gets Real and Elegant with Official Hatwear

If you want to stand a chance at enrolling at the prestigious Eden College, you're going to want to dress and act as elegantly as possible. To aid you

in this, you might want to consider picking up an official *SPY x FAMILY* hat from Japanese hat maker CA4LA, which teamed up with Tatsuya Endo's hit series to produce some truly cosplay-worthy caps.

So far, the line includes Loid Forger's fedora, which is available in adult sizes, and Anya Forger's school uniform beret. The latter is up for order in both adults and kids sizes, and it even has a Stella star on it to show just how well you've been performing at school. Shipping is scheduled for this December, and the Loid hat is priced at ¥28,050 (about \$204). No matter which size Anya hat you choose, you'll need to fork over ¥18,700 (\$140).



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## Bishoujo Optimus Prime Just the Start of Cute Girl Transformers Line

You may have seen Kotobukiya's new figure that reimagines Optimus Prime as a beautiful anime girl, but that's just the start of what is officially the Transformers Bishoujo line. All of Optimus Prime's key features are in place, but otherwise you'd never guess it was the Autobots leader under all of that impressive cuteness. Beyond Optimus in 2023, though, there are more adorable Transformers on the way to the figure maker's larger Bishoujo series.

The line wouldn't be complete without Decepticon leader Megatron, of course, and fans can also look forward to a bishoujo take on iconic Autobot Bumblebee. Designs come from Bishoujo series mainstay Shunya Yamashita (*Dai-Shogun - Great Revolution*), and the products will all be available in overseas regions from international partners. This year's Anime Expo even hinted at figures beyond these, because Kotobukiya held a surprise poll to let attendees vote on the next character. Unsurprisingly, Starscream came out on top against Soundwave and Jazz, but hopefully they won't stop there!

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## A Knight's Tail!

Hail, hail! The Royal Knight Omegamon from *Digimon* has joined Tamashii Nation's DYNACTION series! Standing at 400mm tall, it is a massive action figure featuring faithful colors and utilizing diecast metal parts for durability and heft. Boasting natural posability, this premium action figure can do even the most dramatic of poses with ease, letting you re-create your favorite Digimon moments. What's more, it comes with a dynamic 750mm long cape made of cloth that can take poses of its own. Optional parts allow you to change the direction of Omegamon's glance, and the set includes mini figures of Taichi and Yamato that can ride on his shoulder! This is Omegamon on a scale you've never seen before!

For more information, visit [www.tamashiiations.com](http://www.tamashiiations.com)

## Third Impact!

*Honkai Impact 3rd* is an action title that has won an international following among gamers and anime fans. Set in a modern world corrupted by mysterious energy known as Honkai, a tenacious resistance formed by Valkyries, brave girls carrying anti-Honkai genes, leads humanity in a war of survival and fights for everything that is beautiful in the world.

Since its launch on mobile devices, the game has won an international following and frequently topped App Store's and Google Play's download charts. The



game was ported to PC in late 2019 with cross-save support, making the Honkai-verse more accessible than ever!

At the beginning of 2022, *Honkai Impact 3rd* released an update of its Open World game mode, APHO Chapter 2. More elements including Valkyrie customization, open-world exploration, base building, racing, shooting, and co-op spice up the game like never before.

In addition to the game itself, *Honkai Impact 3rd* has also produced a large number of comics, animation works, and a wealth of fan works, which can be enjoyed on its official YouTube channel.

Visit [honkaiimpact3.hoyoverse.com](http://honkaiimpact3.hoyoverse.com) for more information!







# BLEACH

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# Komi Can't Communicate

## As the laws of anime comedy dictate



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RATING  
TV-14

pretty much an ace at everything she does, even blinking, despite her apparent stoic, withdrawn attitude.

Welcome to Itan High School, where everything is wholesome, extreme, and ridiculous all at the same time.

The name on everyone's lips is "Komi Shouko." She's beautiful, graceful, and

else. As a result, the halls of this school are filled with oddballs, weirdos, heathens, loners, and Najimi. Thus, as the laws of anime comedy dictate, helping Komi make friends at this school is going to be a lot harder than it looks. After all, how can you make friends when everyone thinks you're a goddess among mortals and you don't have the courage to correct them?

So what to make of this adaptation done by the good folks at OLM (who previously worked on the likes of *Odd Taxi* and *Pokémon*). Is it a gag comedy with a mental

health angle? Is it a fluffy romantic drama whose comedy leans on someone's totally crippling

flashback from a previous episode playing on the screen of a TV behind one of the characters. That is seriously clever. It's not just the gags that are good, but the visuals that support them that are good.

Not only that, but a lot of the gag humor is also cranked up to eleven thanks to the way OLM adds frenetic motions and over-the-top facial expressions to translate many of the bonkers characters to the TV. Plus, Komi's Googly Eyes are just too adorable to ignore. The second source is Tadano and the class as a whole. See, everyone in this school has a specific schtick, and his is being "extremely normal." This contrasts greatly with the rest of his class, who, let's be real, are insane weirdos—you got the childhood friend, the shy girl, the chuunibyou, the competitive one, the yandere, some



characters, for sure, and whether they make you laugh will depend on how well you can stomach the individual gimmicks.

And then you have the relationship between Tadano and Komi, which, at present, is far less

concerning. You have this guy who stumbles across this girl's secret, and he never expects to get anything out of her. The narrative is even savvy enough to let the two leads operate outside of each other, letting them branch out and grow close to other people without making them too co-dependent.

So despite its questionable arrangement of characters, *Komi Can't Communicate* is very

much a relatable show, albeit one that happens to be totally bonkers with all sorts of misfits. There's a level of commitment here of not trying to stick to one specific thing, but if there's one thing the show does well, it's the insane relatability of Komi's disorder and her desire to actually do something normal despite her struggles with her anxieties. And I really hope I've communicated all of that.

—Michael Goldstein



At Itan Private High school, she's already made one heck of an impression by pretty much leaving everyone awestruck without saying a word. But once homeroom introductions are over, Tadano Hitohito discovers something interesting about Komi: it's not that she doesn't take issue with the popularity; she actually possesses some extreme level of social anxiety and has trouble communicating with others (hence, the title). After communicating with her via chalkboard, Komi reveals that her goal is to make a hundred friends. So, Tadano decides to be her first friend and promises to help her make ninety-nine more.

However, Tadano Hitohito, who notes himself as being quite capable of reading the room, has failed to realize one particular thing. Itan High School seems to value personality over anything

anxiety? Or is it really Komi's world and we're all just living in it? Fortunately, Komi's anxieties are never the subject of ridicule. A lot of the show's gag humor can be traced to two sources, the first being the show's general art direction. This is one of those anime adaptations that adds on to the main premise and enhances the viewing experience, and there's a lot of visual creativity going on. For example, one episode has a



ninja guy, the list goes on. Tadano himself, despite being labeled as the average one, has his moments where he's just as bonkers as the rest of them. Of note are Osana Najimi, the aforementioned childhood friend whose unknown gender adds to their trollish nature rather than serving as a punchline, and Yamai Ren, whose yandere antics always make her feel like she came from a different show. It's a questionable arrangement of



# The Half-Demon Princesses take on Kirinmaru!



## YASHAHIME

— PRINCESS HALF-DEMON —

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# Dance Dance Danseur

## An affinity for all things ballet



**STUDIO/COMPANY**  
Crunchyroll

**RATING**  
Not Rated

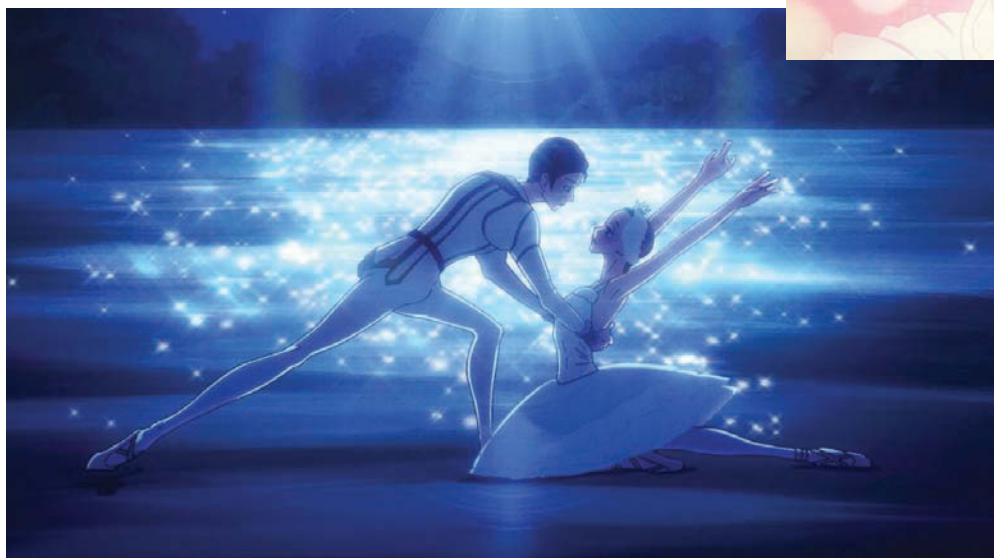
Combining the gracefulness of ice skating or dance with the elegance that only a medium like anime can provide has always produced fantastic series. The latest addition to the now long-running list of performance art-centric shows, *Dance Dance Danseur*, is another example that takes a form of performance and expression like ballet and helps turn it into a high-stakes drama that feels

like another classic in the making.

Junpei Murao is a teen who's also had an affinity for all things ballet. Ever since he was a young boy, he's had his heart set on becoming a ballerina. But he tucked all that away inside of him after his father passed away when he was still young. Instead of following the path of bal-

let, he decided to abandon his dreams and choose a more "masculine" profession at the urging of his uncle to try and support his family, instead taking up Jeet Kune Do. mately turns Junpei's eye back to the stage. And there's a subtle air that Junpei wants Miyako to see him as a brilliant performer as well. Together, the pair as well as Miyako's cousin work together to push Junpei back into exploring where his heart has been all of these years: the beautiful, all-compassing ballet.

Of course, it's not all sparkle and rainbows. Junpei is a man interested in a traditionally "feminine" art, and ends up facing a bit of bullying



let, he decided to abandon his dreams and choose a more "masculine" profession at the urging of his uncle to try and support his family, instead taking up Jeet Kune Do.

But despite all that's happened throughout his life, Junpei has never quite shaken the desire to get into the world of ballet. And he's right on the precipice of going back. He just needs the right encouragement to do so. Everything changes when he encounters a new transfer student named Miyako Godai, as well as Miyako's cousin Ruu Mori. The pair help rekindle Junpei's love for the art in a way that he could never have imagined, and he soon finds himself longing once more to hit the stage and light up faces the way performers did for him.

There's a tight-knit friendship that develops between Junpei and Miyako, but it's Miyako's grace and enthusiasm for the subject that ulti-

and unfair assumptions based on his interests. The show does handle these situations with surprising grace and maturity, and it should inspire anyone looking to jump into something that they love with their entire heart, even if they're afraid of what that might mean.

Beyond the emotional appeal of chasing what you love and making it your own, *Dance Dance Danseur* is an absolutely breathtaking series that MAPPA went all out on. Every dance is beautiful and arresting, as are the characters themselves. The accompanying score will often send chills down your spine, as will the techniques woven into each and every dance number. Unfortunately, there's another thing that will do the same: the ending.

*Dance Dance Danseur* is an arresting trip into the journey of the psyche of someone who no longer has to hide who they are to conform. And

yet, the ending the series suffers from is such a letdown that it seems as though the series was content to ignore the lessons it was actively teaching with each episode. When every episode hurtles toward this conclusion, it starts feeling a bit disappointing – so be ready for this while you're taking all of the beauty in.

Fortunately, the ride is such a pleasant one that even when it seemingly takes a hard left turn, *Dance Dance Danseur* is a spectacle in every single way. Whether you're into ballet or have even a passing interest in the arts, it's a gateway that will transport you to another world in ways many series simply aren't capable of. There's plenty to love here, with drama, romance, and intrigue seeping out of every pore. Junpei will go down in your memories as one of the year's most unique protagonists, though partially it will end up being because of a bizarre narrative decision – but thankfully, *Swan Lake* isn't marred by some of its more horrific moments, and neither is *Dance Dance Danseur*. **Recommended.**

—Brittany Vincent



# NARUTO

Set 8

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# Sakura Trick—Complete Collection

## Romance blossoms



Haruka Takayama and Yu Sonoda have been best friends since junior high. Always inseparable, they do everything together, and they always sit next to each other in class. But when high school rolls around, things start to change. When they find themselves seated on opposite sides of the classroom, the pair find their close-knit friendship is starting to change a bit. In *Sakura Trick*, romance blossoms between two high school girls out of a desire to maintain a special relationship. And though it's just about as simplistic as a sweet yuri series could be, it's still a very fun, light treat that's worth biting into.

When Haruka and Yu discover they'll have to start making new friends, Haruka takes it much harder. She's been harboring romantic feelings for Yu for some time now, and spends much of her time fantasizing about her best friend. When she sees Yu getting along with other girls, we see her jealous and clingy side come out — while on the other hand, Yu is a much more conservative young woman who's decidedly more timid about showing any feelings for a potential lover who's also her best friend.

Thus, *Sakura Trick* revolves mostly around all of the times Haruka and Yu can sneak away to spend time together and do what they've learned they enjoy best: kiss. They'll do it literally any moment that they can, and there's no shortage of footage of these ladies locking lips. The series leans heavily on their clandestine meetings, where they go off and spend time together the best they can, whether that's to enjoy their lunch together or heading up to the school rooftop. While Haruka is completely certain about her feelings for Yu at first, Yu takes time to warm up, and is more reti-



STUDIO/COMPANY  
Sentai Filmworks

RATING  
TV-14







cent about the kisses she shares with her best friend.

This leads to some potentially back-and-forth situations occasionally when you want the pair to stop hemming and hawing and “officially” become a couple so they don’t have to slink around and kiss in secret. If you’re the type of yuri fan who wants your heroines out and proud without any stealth makeout sessions, *Sakura Trick* will get old very quickly. If that doesn’t matter so much to you, there’s a lot of silly, saucy fun to be had here. And keep in mind, this series stemmed from comic strips much like *Azumanga Daioh*, so there’s not any real rhyme or reason to make things ridiculously serious.

It’s all quite light and airy. For instance, Haruka and Yu will make out at nearly every opportunity, and though usually it’s Haruka initiating, sometimes Yu will take over and surprise Haruka with a gentle kiss on the lips to

make her smile. There’s not much of a plot beyond this budding relationship though, except for some of the adjacent relationships to our main characters’ interactions. Ironically enough, Haruka and Yu are worried about making their own relationship public when at least two of their friend pairs are also romantically involved with each other — a strange decision that feels silly in the grand scheme of things.

If the lack of story bugs you, at least stick around for the fanservice, which is top-notch stuff for casual yuri viewers. You’ve got one girl straddling the other in a desk to kiss her, cute, breathless makeouts in the hallways, and much more. There’s plenty here to get hearts racing, but it’s all ultimately candy fluff for anyone who likes watching girls falling in love with other girls. It does that quite well, and if that’s what you’re looking for, *Sakura Trick* does tick all those boxes. Just don’t go into it expecting

*Maria Watches Over Us* or *Dear Brother*. The real “sakura” trick is pulling off a series that gets people to keep watching long after the show’s run its course, but for fans starved for more yuri content, even scraps feel like eating a whole meal sometimes.

—Brittany Vincent



# Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie

Dramatic romance with a conflict



**STUDIO/COMPANY**  
Crunchyroll  
**RATING**  
Not Rated

Yuu Izumi is your typical second-year high school student. Or at least he would be, if he didn't seem to have some of the worst luck in the world. Just leaving the house can prove to be a disaster for him if he's not careful. Luckily, he's got his high school sweetheart, Shikimori, by his side. And she might be the cutest girl in the entire school. But, as this show's title *Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie* suggests, there's more to her than her looks.

While the pair are usually an adorable, lovey-dovey couple with little that might intrigue others beyond their feelings for each other, Shikimori is a lot cooler than her cute exterior lets on. In fact, she turns into something of a different person if Izumi finds himself in trouble, or if she's jealous — or just upset. So she might be absolutely, heartbreakingly cute, sure. But she

turns into a suave, heroine-like version of herself when the mood strikes — and that usually means when Izumi is really going through it. This just in: a woman has different sides to herself. And while this might be enough to propel some stories for the casual viewer, but with this series, it doesn't really amount to much.

When it comes to romance or slice-of-life shows, there are a couple of elements you absolutely must have for a successful anime: a couple with excellent chemistry and conflict to move the plot along and help the relationship evolve. With *Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie*, there's a couple with an already-

established relationship, and an issue that at least one of them deals with, with Izumi having some of the worst luck ever, but beyond that there's so little conflict to speak of that it becomes a bit tiresome.



© KEIGO MAKI, KODANSHA / Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie Production Committee

## Initial D: First Stage

The art of drifting



**STUDIO/COMPANY**  
Crunchyroll  
**RATING**  
Not Rated

*Initial D* is a show that's become an integral part of the anime landscape—working its way into game, racing, and music fandom. Even if you've never seen a single episode, you've run into memes and remixes that only exist thanks to its pervasive popularity. Nearly 25 years after the premiere of the anime, a viewer's first approach will be a lot different from how it might have been initially. That's a good thing, though, as many of the stylistic aspects that might have given a viewer pause early on are now accepted... possibly even iconic.

The series dives into the Japanese street racing scene of the 1990s, set chiefly on and around Mt. Akina (a fictionalized version of Mt. Haruna). Local teens gather late at night to challenge each other to races on the mountain road, tuning their cars and mastering the art of drifting to conquer the highway's hairpin turns. But the mountain's most fascinating driver isn't one of these kids: it's a mysterious Toyota Trueno that glides through the turns late at night. The racers become determined to discover who this "ghost"



© Shuichi Shigeno / Kodansha - wedge link



is... and Itsuki, one of the regular spectators, knows him quite well.

The "ghost" is the taciturn Takumi Fujiwara, son of equally taciturn tofu shop owner Bunta. Takumi has been entrusted with late-night deliveries, requiring him to drive the challenging roads of Akina without breaking any of the tofu. A cup of water serves as his gauge: if he doesn't spill any, he's driving safely. His desire to get home and go to bed means, without realizing it, he's taught himself to drift through Akina's tight corners with raw, impressive skill.



Izumi is timid, quiet, and friendly, but an ultimately very boring frontman. He lacks the quiet strength of *My Dress-Up Darling*'s Gojo or the timid naivete of Naoto from *Don't Toy with Me, Miss Nagatoro*. He suffers from the type of milquetoast anime lead personality that never really goes anywhere in romance series, and always apologizes for his shortcomings, his behavior, and anything that could be perceived as a slight while his girlfriend does anything within her power to make sure he's able to live his best life. It's sweet, it's endearing, but it's ultimately extremely boring when the same few things happen every episode.

What's unfortunate is that, in terms of animation quality and character design (especially on Shikimori's part), this is a great-looking series. *Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie* is gorgeous-looking. Each character is given such care and detail, even the supporting cast, that it's extremely visually arresting. Shikimori herself gives massively popular heroine Marin Kitagawa a run for her

money in terms of looks. But she can't hold a candle to the *My Dress-Up Darling* star, in terms of personality or intrigue.

The entirety of the series falls flat in that regard, unfortunately. And since the onus seems to fall squarely on Shikimori to propel things along, there's little reason to look forward to the next episode when you



always have a good idea of what to expect next. This is a series that desperately needs some spicier conflicts beyond Shikimori occasionally getting jealous, angry at her peers, or wanting



to impress Izumi. There are also the friends who don't understand why Shikimori wastes her time with Izumi – but none of these things make the series interesting enough to endure the entirety of its 13 episodes.

If you're only interested in seeing two halves of a couple support each other no matter what, with a strong girlfriend who needs to be there for her unlucky, golden retriever of a boyfriend, you'll find plenty to like about *Shikimori's Not Just a Cutie*. If you're ready to take a bite out of a challenging, dramatic romance with a conflict that permeates the entirety of the series, you're going to want to move on, because you won't find any of that here.

—Brittany Vincent

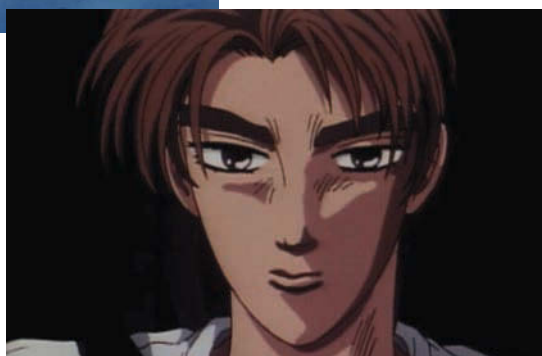


heard rumors of his skill, and test his abilities down unfamiliar roads. And, somewhere along the way, he might even start to enjoy himself a little.

*Initial D: First Stage* is just a small part of the series as a whole—which consists of six seasons, extra OVAs and compilations, and a film.



Unfortunately for Itsuki, Takumi doesn't have nearly the level of interest in cars that his admirers do. Getting him out for a race takes some time; but before long, he has one foot in the scene. Before the first season closes out he'll cross paths with the super-skilled Takahashi brothers, challenge other local teams who have



New arrivals to the scene may find the animation jarring, between the art style and the extremely CG cars. Even in 1998, when the intersection between 2D and 3D in anime was accepted as rough, it was an aspect of the series that was regularly parodied elsewhere. It speaks to the success of the series that that style has

gone from being a potential deal-breaker for some viewers to being an identifying trait of the show: a visual shorthand that people can reference or parody affectionately.

While the series has understandably brought car fans into the fold, it's still accessible for viewers who aren't necessarily knowledgeable about racing. As with any special-interest series, you'll get more out of it if it's a topic with which you're familiar. But it's also created a generation of racing fans, with spectators serving as a sort of Greek chorus to complement the racers' interior monologues as they drive. It can feel melodramatic the first few times; but before long, you'll feel yourself caught up in the intensity of the moment. The Eurobeat soundtrack does a lot of heavy lifting in this regard.

The first season of *Initial D* is largely Takumi-centric: it's his journey to finding fun in racing—more importantly, it's his journey to finding *something* to care about and devote himself to. Later stages will branch out into the lives and ambitions of his fellow racers, explore their growth as a team, and address Bunta's own history. (If it feels like he knows more than he lets on, it's because he absolutely does.) If you're interested in starting this series, it pays to start from the beginning. Watching Takumi grow and change, and slowly being brought into the broader story of Mt. Akina's racing community, is a rewarding journey full of twists and turns.

—Kara Dennison



# Yuki Yuna is a Hero

## A deliciously bitter candy bar



STUDIO/COMPANY  
Sentai Entertainment

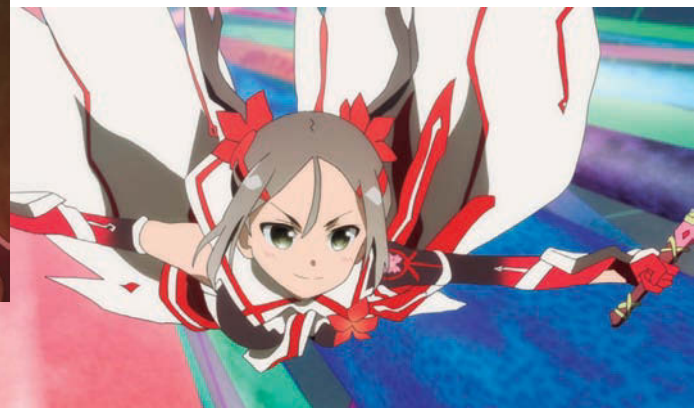
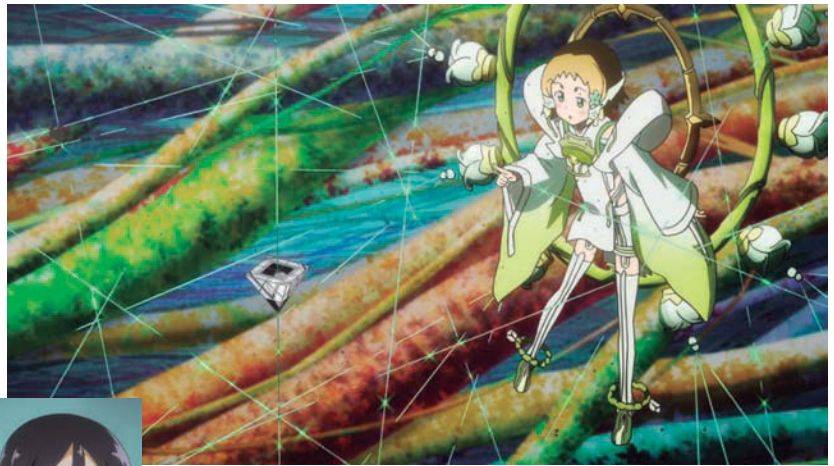
RATING  
TV-14

Yuki Yuna is a second-year student at Sanshu Middle School. She's a kind girl who loves to help others, and is never seen without a smile on her face. That's why she's a perfect fit for the Hero Club, whose members work to help out anyone in need by assisting the community. But being a

member of the Hero Club isn't always sunshine and roses.

One fateful day, the members of the Hero Club find themselves bathed in light and transported to a strange forest filled with monsters called Vertex. The Vertex want to obliterate the Divine

group, but things tend to change a bit around the show's mid-point. And by changing,



Tree, or the guardian of humanity. The girls discover they've been tasked with working to protect the Divine Tree as they become literal heroes. Welcome to the world of *Yuki Yuna is a Hero*.

The girls of the Hero Club find themselves face to face with a much more harrowing goal of saving the world instead of being content to save individuals who come to them for assistance. Suddenly, the world is much more than just making sure students get things they need and their community can handle anything thrown at it. The fate of the world hangs in the balance – and the blessing of humanity that's sorely needed for the race to live on could be destroyed at any moment. As usual, the Vertex need to be vanquished by heroines from another world. Nothing new there.

Yuna and her friends use a special phone app given to them by an organization called Taisha to help them transform into their own versions of heroes while fighting the Vertex. It's all set up much like your typical *Sailor Moon* or *Tokyo Mew Mew*-esque series, where every episode focuses on adding a new girl and her abilities to the

there are rules that spring up that you'll never have seen coming – disturbing ones that will absolutely change the way you see the characters introduced from the first few episode and have you guessing about how they'll be interacting for the remainder of the series.

That's because, much like *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, *Yuki Yuna is a Hero* takes what looks to be a sugary sweet magical girl fantasy and turns it on its head. After setting it up as a relatively simple genre exercise, things start to go south, and fast. Like *Madoka Magica*, there are consequences that come along with using the special powers bestowed upon the girls. There's a dark twist that even the most jaded of magical girl fans won't expect, and while it has nothing to do with giving one's soul away, it does equate to important losses that each girl must deal with to save those in need.

With that said, however, the series does rely on familiar magical girl tropes that aren't always exciting given their repetitive nature. But when you learn the dark secret behind the girls' abili-

ties, things heat up rather quickly. It's because of this major shift in tone that *Yuki Yuna is a Hero* remains as watchable as it is. When the repercussions for fighting in certain "Mankai" forms hit, the narrative can become downright depressing – reaching into body horror territory.

The juxtaposition of light and airy magical girl fare with gorgeous animation and endearing characters makes this unique series an interesting watch, no matter how you slice it. It's like a deliciously bitter candy bar with a sweet milk chocolate exterior that you're never quite ready for. But if that's something you're looking for in your next treat, remember *Yuki Yuna is a Hero*. And then be ready to watch it tear you apart in ways you weren't quite ready for. If you're tired of the paint-by-numbers magical series of yesteryear and are ready for more of the same in the vein of *Madoka* – and wish that were the norm instead – *Yuki Yuna* should be an exciting watch.

—Brittany Vincent









© Shinobu Ohtaka, KODANSHA/ORIENT Production Committee



# Orient

## Inner Strength



STUDIO/COMPANY  
Crunchyroll

RATING  
N/A

If there's one thing that the first cour of the *ORIENT* anime taught us, it's that sometimes it's okay if your protagonist is just a big ol' punching bag. That's kind of where we left Musashi last time

around, and not much has changed in the new set of episodes. While *ORIENT* remains a steady mid-C in production values and overall execution, the narrative fueling it is finally getting a little more interesting, making it something worth keeping



around during the lighter anime seasons.

The second cour of *ORIENT* takes us right into the Awaji Island arc, which finds Musashi, Kane-maki Kojiro and Hattori Tsugumi attempting to form a strong Bushi band of their own. As they quickly learn, though, there's a lot more to being a successful team than meets the eye, especially if they have any hope of helping the rest of the bands take down the greatest threat yet, the looming menace known as Yamata no Orochi, the Artillery Wyrm.

The stakes are high immediately in this set of episodes, and even before we get to the meat of the battle there's plenty of in-fighting to keep Musashi and his small crew occupied. In addition to the mighty Takeda Naotora and the Takeda Bushi, there are a bunch of Bushi the same age as Musashi, including Shimazu Akihiro, Amako Katsumi and the sheltered princess

herself, Saruwatari Michiru. One or more of these characters have their own dark secrets to protect, and they quickly rocket to the surface as *ORIENT* begins to heat up after getting an episode or two of setup out of the way.

Beyond getting our weekly dose of Musashi getting his ass handed to him—with the occasional bright spot on the horizon for our red-haired hero—the highlight of the return has without a doubt been the expanded roster of villains. In addition to the return of the enigmatic and absurdly powerful Shiro Inukai (voiced by Hiro Shimono), it's been a treat to see just how nasty characters like Seiroku Inukawa (Tarusuke

Shingaki) and Yataro Inuda (Tomokazu Sugita) have the potential to be. There's also some interesting lore to dive into regarding the way Bushi bands work together, with some cool twists on powers that make banding together a very literal thing, but I don't know if *ORIENT* would work at all without the bad guys behind the scenes.

Oni designs have also improved a bit, and the central terror is a far sight more appealing than the goofy monsters we were introduced to at the beginning of the story. I do think that Shinobu Ohtaka's source material could have been elevated with the right production studio behind it, but A.C.G.T. (*Human Crossing*, *New Fist of the North Star OVA*) doesn't exactly leave a strong impression. From the color palette to the animation itself, this is almost as muted as a production can get. It certainly doesn't look awful, but even the most heavy-hitting moments have a sort of lackluster appeal to them.

The most merciful thing about the second cour of *ORIENT* is that it started during a pretty dry anime season. Summer 2022 wasn't even a fraction as overflowing as Fall, making this the perfect appetizer to get out of the way before all the overloaded main courses arrive. From top to bottom, *ORIENT* remains a pretty rote shonen tale with a protagonist that insists on trudging forward no matter how many obstacles stand

in his way. Musashi's perseverance is admirable and, in many ways, it mirrors the audience's willingness to sit through mediocrity in hopes of uncovering the occasional shining gem tucked away within it all. *ORIENT* is the Diet Coke some folks insist on having with lunch. The flavor isn't necessarily there, and you don't always feel great when you're done, but it's an enjoyably harmless ritual nonetheless. Well, aside from a bit of unwelcome indigestion.

—Joseph Luster





## Look Back in Manga

### New Manga Reviews



**PUBLISHER**  
Viz Media

**STORY**  
Takashi Shiina

**MAIN CHARACTER DESIGNS**  
Rumiko Takahashi

**RATING**  
Teen

#### Yashahime: Princess Half-Demon

There are few more iconic series from the 2000s than *Inuyasha*. If Kagome and her half-demon beau didn't have you in a chokehold during that time, can you even say you were an anime fan? And if you're familiar with the series, you know that half of the allure was waiting for Inuyasha and Kagome to finally seal their relationship with a kiss. Or anything romantic at all. It took some

time, but the original series finally came to a close—and gave the shippers some of what they wanted.

Fast forward to today, and we have a sequel, *Yashahime: Princess Half-Demon*. *Yashahime* started as an anime with character designs by *Inuyasha* creator Rumiko Takahashi; the manga, by Takashi Shiina, loosely adapts the anime.

The first volume picks up the story at an unexpected point. We learn that Inuyasha's half-brother Sesshomaru had a daughter, Towa—but she's living in the present day, with no idea where she came from and a feeling that she doesn't fit into this era. What's more, she's saddled with powers she can't entirely control and has to hide them to fit in.

Then a demon attacks, as demons often do in the world of *Inuyasha*. Towa is sent back to feudal Japan, where she, her chilly twin sister Setsuna, and Inuyasha's high-spirited daughter Moroha meet up to form a trio straight out of the annals of fanfiction history, all to carry out a mission from the mystical Tree of Ages. Their goal? Find their parents, have their questions about the past answered, and repair a rift in time that's throwing things into chaos.

If you're expecting another *Inuyasha*, you won't find it here. The tone is decidedly different. Towa isn't quite like her father, and is even a bit unlikable at first. In fact, I wasn't partial to any of the children of these classic characters at first blush, likely because they were more different than I was expecting. But the story spends time developing the connections between the time periods and opens the door to some intriguing



IS THIS...  
MY HOME?!

I DON'T  
KNOW IF  
WE SHOULD  
CELEBRATE  
OR NOT...

...BUT  
CONGRATU-  
LATIONS  
ON COMING  
HOME AFTER  
TEN YEARS  
AWAY!



situations. Towa in high school, making the girls swoon with her androgynous beauty? That wasn't something Kagome ever did.

Details like that make *Yashahime* a refreshing departure. There are still plenty of nostalgic demon-centric battles where we can watch Towa fight off demons, and when Setsuna and Moroha come into the picture, the action ramps up. As the story develops, we can see the traits the girls inherited from their parents as well as the qualities that make them unique. It's as if a talented fic writer was handed the reins to continue the story so many of us loved in our adolescence.

This is an extremely strong beginning to a saga that will, like *Naruto Shippuden* and *Boruto*, feel simultaneously new and familiar to readers who know the source material. It's geared toward those who have already experienced the original *Inuyasha* saga, so if you're a newcomer to this universe you're likely to be confused. But if you stuck around through it all before, there's plenty to love—especially how much of a heartthrob Towa is. (Brittany Vincent)



### This Onmyoji Is Bad News

Harutaka Mikadomori is the heir to a family of powerful onmyoji, or yin-yang magicians. Along with his amazing powers of exorcism and purification, he's also a magnet for evils of all kinds. Enter Mutsuki Mikadomori (very distant relative from another branch of the family, don't worry about it), who acts as Harutaka's bodyguard and teacher. Harutaka can't seem

to get a read on Mutsuki's personality. He switches between serious and flirtatious, and Haru is confused by and attracted to both sides. Their relationship amps up after a series of misadventures, including a demon from Mutsuki's past who puts Harutaka in danger.

While there isn't much of a running plot to the episodic adventures, the relationship between Harutaka and Mutsuki feels like it could develop into something interesting, and it's frustrating that it doesn't. The resolution, as the characters reach a new understanding of each other, is satisfying enough, but there isn't much of a conclusion. It's a shame we don't see more of their story, or more of intriguing supporting characters like the demon Kaura.

The art is rather blocky and the characters look a lot alike. In fact, the volume includes a short story with unrelated characters who are nearly indistinguishable from Harutaka and Mutsuki. While there are some nice backgrounds and solid blacks that lead the eye, the characters suffer from same-face syndrome. The inks are very clean—perhaps too clean. A more



This Onmyoji Is Bad News: ©Hiroshi Asagi, Touka Namimaki 2022

organic polish could have made the characters look more human and dynamic.

Still, the protagonists are enjoyable, and Mutsuki benefits from a chapter detailing his backstory which adds sympathy to his character. Despite the book's shortcomings, the creators have a good sense of pacing and character. The story of the Harutaka and Mutsuki may not be a new one, but the writing is charming and the romance is cute and worth a read. (Che Gilson)

### Bleach 20th Anniversary Edition

With a new 20th anniversary edition out from Viz, it's worth revisiting *Bleach*, one of the seminal shonen manga of the 2000s (though, at 74 volumes, it lasted well into the mid-2010s). Street-wise teenager Ichigo "Strawberry" Kurosaki has



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY AND ART

Tite Kubo

RATING

Teen

the power to see ghosts, which complicates his lifestyle of loitering with his gang, palling around with his stereotypical childhood friend/love interest Orihime, and bickering with his spunky sisters. Things get much hairier when he meets Rukia, a Soul Reaper whose job is to dispatch lingering spirits to the Soul Society. She introduces him to the existence of Hollows, souls twisted by regret and loneliness into vengeful monsters. During a battle, Ichigo accidentally absorbs Rukia's powers and takes up the Reaper mantle





himself, with Rukia becoming his trainer.

As of Volume 1, that's all there is to the story, and it's more than enough of a hook for a *Shonen Jump* hit: episodic action/horror plots, speedline-heavy fights against freaky-looking monsters, and slapstick hijinks between the heroes. Over the course of its long run, *Bleach* becomes more convoluted, with Tite Kubo forever adding supernatural abilities, Soul Society politics, and terminology that fans have to read every volume and watch every episode of the anime to memorize. But the early chapters are fast-paced fun. Later, most of Ichigo's friends and family will manifest powers and join the battle, and the manga's early emphasis on the "friends" leg of the *Shonen Jump* friendship-effort-victory triune foreshadows how important

the supporting cast will become down the line.

Kubo's art is rough but dynamic. He doesn't have the visual worldbuilding chops of some of his 2000s-era *Shonen Jump* colleagues, like Eiichiro Oda or Yoshihiro Togashi (the latter of whom has a similarly sketchy line, but always gives the reader weird, cool stuff to look at), but he draws with enthusiasm. Ichigo and his friends live in the kind of shonen-manga world where everyone is constantly yelling and attacking each other, so the characters careen around the page even when they're just going to school or jostling for breakfast. *Bleach* characters, male and female alike, tend to have long, lanky physiques, rubber skeletons, and bottomless appetites for fighting.

The 20th anniversary edition doesn't add

much, just a new cover based on art from the manga's magazine series launch. But it's hard to improve on the original amusingly slangy Viz localization. (Other characters on Ichigo: "He's got tweaked-out hair, he's rude, immature, short-tempered..." "That's one bloodthirsty berry head.") If you've already traveled with the Soul Reapers, you can safely pass on the new edition. But if you haven't, this is a great chance to dive in. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



## Stalemate

It's been a while since a book like this has come up for review, so here's the content warning: incest manga ahead! While the main five-chapter arc in this book is a story of (very, very appropriately) forbidden love, the additional short stories aren't all about keeping it in the family. But let's begin at the beginning.

As a child, Shinichi discovers his uncle's chess set, and after learning to play he goes over to his uncle's house for a game almost every day. When Uncle Chiharu tells Shinichi he should be hanging out with kids his own age, Shinichi is devastated because he's fallen in love with his uncle (yikes). What's more, it turns out Chiharu returns Shinichi's affections (double yikes). Over the next four chapters, they grow closer as Shinichi prepares to graduate from high school. Yes, as if the premise couldn't get worse, Shinichi is still underage when the relationship gets underway. Things get sleazier when Shinichi is nearly seduced (i.e., assaulted) by another horny older man, but Chiharu saves him (mostly for himself). All's well that ends well, at least by the creepy standards of an incest-themed BL.

At least the remaining short stories are refreshing, breezy entertainment. In "Holding Hands Together," a young man returns to the town where he spent time as a child. He's reunited with his boyhood crush, but said crush turns out not to be the person he remembered. In "How to Get Along With a Cat," Nakano wishes he were a cat and is granted cat ears and a tail. Turns out the school bully is a cat person and takes full advantage of having a catboy to help him befriend the local strays. A short series of autobiographical comics rounds out the volume. In each one, Aoyama anthropomorphizes everyday objects as hot young men with dynamic relationships.

Despite her questionable story choices, Aoyama has undeniable art skill. The style is pure shoujo manga, so don't expect more than the bare minimum of backgrounds, but the balance of positive and negative space is well-crafted and the panels have a lovely flow. The





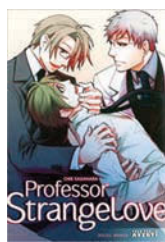
Professor Strangelove: ©Tomoei Sasahara 2022

character designs are nice, if a little lacking in personality. Some of the best art is in the autobiographical section. It's just unfortunate that the incest story occupies over half the volume. If that's what you're looking for, though, you know where to find it. [Che Gilson]

### Professor Strangelove

What does a college student without enough credits to graduate do? He takes extra credit wherever he can get it, of course. When Hayama is assigned to assist the eccentric Professor Shiina with an experiment, he's understandably hesitant. After all, he knows nothing about the professor's work. One of his own professors sweetens the deal: help Shiina out, and he won't have to repeat a year. Simple enough, right?

It's an intriguing setup for a BL manga, or at



**PUBLISHER**  
Kadokawa  
**STORY AND ART**  
Tomoei Sasahara  
**RATING**  
Mature/18+

least it would be if the story weren't intent on speeding through the plot points at a breakneck pace. We've barely established a narrative before Professor Shiina plants a kiss on Hayama without even checking to make sure he's Shiina's assistant. Not only that, but he does it to pass an experimental drug to the college student. Weird? Absolutely. Assault? Yes. It seems Shiina has developed a drug to make people fall in love. But instead of affecting the subject's emotions, it turns him into a klutz who creates clumsy situations with the kind of pratfalls and awkward run-ins that, in a

romance manga, inevitably turn into love. Yeah.

Now that Hayama has taken the pill, it should be obvious where things will go from here. Except they don't. *Professor Strangelove* continues to devolve into idiocy with each turn of the page. Not only is it revealed that Shiina set up the "experiment" because he has a crush on Hayama, but Hayama still has to repeat a year anyway. All of this happens in the first chapter, along with coercion, stalking, and a veritable gallery of red flags.

After this convoluted setup, the story consists entirely of Shiina yearning for Hayama in the most unhealthy ways possible. Hayama has no interest in Shiina's advances, but the professor continues to force himself on the student anyway, up to and including pushing for the pair to live together after Hayama has to drop out of college. None of this is sexy or romantic. Mostly, it's annoying. It's harassment under the guise of love, a battle of attrition that wears Hayama down.

It's hard to recommend *Professor Strangelove* even to the most hardcore BL fans. The artwork is attractive, and the leads look great, but the premise and execution are some of the worst the genre has seen in some time. Not only does the story feel as though it's skipping crucial information as it hurries from scene to scene, but it's filled with lies, stalking, and other elements which, while they can be guilty pleasures in romance fiction, come off as coercive and strange here.

Bottom line: If you're looking for weird, suffocating BL with unhealthily obsessed seme characters, there are far better options than this one. (Brittany Vincent)



**PUBLISHER**  
Viz Media  
**STORY AND ART**  
Junji Ito  
**RATING**  
Teen +

### Black Paradox

It's hardly a Junji Ito manga without an obsessive visual fixation on some banal-seeming shape: spirals, hair, fish. *Black Paradox* has balls. The one-volume horror manga opens with a group of strangers on an afternoon road trip to commit suicide together. The four met on "the suicide site Black Paradox" and have different

bizarre reasons for wanting to

die: Taburo is being pursued by his evil-looking doppelganger, Baracchi feels that her mirror image is mocking her for the abscess that deforms half her face, Pii-tan is depressed that his robot duplicate outdoes him, and Maruso, a typical haunted-eyed Ito heroine, has a powerful premonition that bad things are about to happen. Five pages in, it doesn't take psychic powers to figure that much out.

In the early chapters, there's dark humor in the quartet's thwarted efforts to commit suicide together, which are interrupted by supernatural





### The (Pet) Detective Agency

Rou Nakamura and Fumi Sako run a detective agency that's supposed to specialize in people. However, Rou's "animal magnetism" means he can find any lost pet almost instantly. While Fumi handles the human side of the biz, Rou is a pet rescuer extraordinaire. Rou has a big crush on his employer/partner and Fumi definitely has a case of the feels but worries about their age difference; Rou is just barely twenty, after all. But between finding cheating husbands and bringing home strays, Rou has plenty of time to flirt with Fumi.

*The (Pet) Detective Agency* combines slice-of-life antics with humor and a sprinkle of drama. There's a lot of romantic will-they-won't-they, but that's not a bad thing. Both Rou and Fumi are likable and have an opposites-attract vibe that gives the sexual tension some oomph. Despite their differences, they still have enough in common that readers will be rooting for them to get together from panel one. *The (Pet) Detective Agency* is self-contained in a single volume, so there's no need to wait for another volume to find out if Rou and Fumi get it on.



PUBLISHER  
Kuma

STORY AND ART  
Noji

RATING  
Unrated/Older Teen

Noji's art is fluid and sketchy, with inks reminiscent of calligraphic brush strokes. The open lines are fleshed out with screentones which help add depth. Even the props and backgrounds have a welcoming organic, hand-drawn look to them. Rou and Fumi receive the most artistic attention, but noji has a delicate touch with the side characters and makes them all interesting in their own right. The characters are fleshed-out well and flashbacks help fill in Rou's unhappy past while adding dimension to the central relationship. The pacing is great, and the mysteries have entertaining twists which usually pan out to a happy ending.

It's lovely to read a one-volume BL manga with an interesting premise and lots of fun plot twists. The cases are entertaining and often get solved in unconventional ways, which makes it compulsive reading for more than just the romance. (Che Gilson)



### Afro Samurai

I had, of course, heard of *Afro Samurai* before I picked up the manga adaptation from Titan. Even when you don't watch a lot of anime, you hear about the anime voiced by Samuel L. Jackson. But when I was assigned the manga, I didn't know what to expect beyond a samurai with an Afro. To spoil this review completely, it's a violent revenge story set in one of those post-

apocalyptic futures that are low-tech until they need to be high-tech. It's totally brain-dead and I love it!

*Afro Samurai* does have a bit of a reason for being set in the future rather than the past, the reason being that Takahasi Okazaki (or maybe the translator) really wants everybody to talk like late 1990s hip-hop artists. The dialogue provides a fun flourish and readers more versed in hip-hop may enjoy it even more than I did. Fun as the speech patterns are, they're just window dressing to *Afro Samurai*'s real strengths: great fights and a strong sense of page layout. My copy of *Afro Samurai* is digital, as review copies often are. In lesser manga with this much fighting, the action often gets muddy when you have you to scroll from page to page. That's never the case with *Afro Samurai*; the fights are well laid out and not obscured by sound effects. As basic as that sounds, it's often forgotten that if your entire manga is about fighting, you need to know how to draw a fight. Okazaki not only knows that, but also how to draw distinct faces! That's a talent that's way rarer than it should be in a visual medium.

The fight scenes are also aided by splashes of red blood on otherwise black-and-white pages. I know "single color contrasting against black and



## RPG-Oh I Tabletop Gaming from Japan

## Konosuba: God's Blessing on this Wonderful World TRPG

The most interesting thing about the tabletop RPG adaptation of *Konosuba*, Natsume Akatsuki's hit *isekai* light novel series and spinoff generator, is the "actual play" report that takes up the first 80 pages of the book. Long before shows like *Critical Role*, Japanese game designers were including transcripts of games to show people how to play them, and reading a description of original series creator Natsume Akatsuki himself playing the game, along with other light novelists like Teppei Nagatsuki (*Re:Zero*), is a fun introduction to *Konosuba*'s comedy-fantasy feel.



<b>PUBLISHER</b>
Yen Press
<b>ORIGINAL STORY</b>
Natsume Akatsuki
<b>ART</b>
Kurone Mishima
<b>GAME ADAPTATION</b>
F.E.A.R.
<b>RATING</b>
Unrated/All ages

Alas, the problem with tabletop RPGs based on comedies is that it's hard to make gamers act as funny as professional authors. Since you can't gamify the rules of comedy (well, some RPGs try, but *Konosuba* doesn't), the result is a simple dungeon-crawling game using only six-sided dice, with 2D6+ bonuses for most challenges. You can't play the original *Konosuba* characters (reincarnated teenager Kazuma, clumsy goddess Aqua, 14-year-old wizard Megumin, and masochistic knight Darkness), so instead you create new adventurers in the same style.

Characters have seven ability scores, some of them awkwardly named: "Dexterity" and "Agility" are different categories, as are "Mind" and "Intelligence." The three racial choices are a reincarnated person from the real world, a Crimson Magic Clan member (the obvious choice for any magic-using character), or a catchall native *isekai* inhabitant. Twelve starter classes initially seem like a lot of options, until you realize that only four of them—Warrior, Wizard, Priest, and Thief—are fully fleshed out. "Adventurer" is a grab-bag that lets you mix and match skills from the other classes, and the remaining seven classes (including Archer, Elemental Master, and Rune Knight) are so thinly described they don't even have illustrations.

The random list of character backgrounds is funny (was your reincarnated character hit by a truck, or struck by lightning?) and the skills include elemental magic and a few amusing options like Fishing, Hunting, and "Gifted Meat Skill" (during each game, you acquire three pieces of meat from friendly shopkeepers). Characters also have the option of starting with a "cheat," such as the ability to come back from the dead, being a goddess in disguise, or having a scary face that makes enemies fumble in fear once per game.

Unfortunately, these kinds of fun random tables and meta in-jokes are all too rare, and most of the game's rules and character options are devoted to combat. Adventurers accept semi-serious quests from the Adventurer's Guild and fight monsters such as orcs, goblins and the dreaded killer cabbage. As you level up from 1 to 10, you gain skills and buy more powerful equipment, most of which can only be used when you've reached a sufficiently high level, and...that's it. Almost no space is dedicated to out-of-combat activities, roleplaying, gamemastering, adventure ideas or the implied endgame of fighting the Demon King when your level is high enough.

Worldbuilding is absent, too. Some TTRPG books are fun to read as gazetteers even for people who don't play the games, but the *Konosuba* RPG somehow manages to explain *less* about the *Konosuba* world than you can learn from reading the books or watching the show, offering only a short description of one city plus 27 monsters, 10 pages of equipment, seven traps, and weirdly, seven "objects" (including "door," "wall," "ceiling" and "general object").

The often clunky rules text and near-total lack of artwork further weaken the book, making it a disappointment with little for either *Konosuba* fans or roleplayers.

—Jason Bradley Thompson

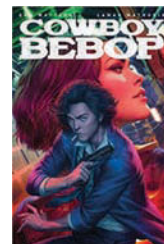
white" is not a new trick. Frank Miller used it in *Sin City*, and there have been Wolverine and Batman stories that did it, but since Batman and Wolverine are usually in color anyway, red blood is not too shocking. If you're reading a manga like *Afro Samurai*, it's more than likely not your first manga. Your brain says that manga is black and white and people in manga bleed something akin to ink. When I saw the color, I said out loud,

"Holy crap, that's some blood." When you talk to your comic, you know it's working.

There will of course be readers, even some who like "mature manga," who will not like *Afro Samurai* like I did. There's only one panel of nudity (and I had to look pretty carefully to know it was nudity). There's very little comedy beyond the samurai talking like rappers, and there's no romance. Some readers will be turned off by

those missing elements. Me? I was hoping *Afro Samurai* would be about a guy with a sword cutting bad guys into flank steak and that is, rather blessedly, just what I got.

As stylized as *Afro Samari* is, it's also at heart a throwback to the kind of manga I used to love. **Recommended.** (Robert McCarthy)



## Cowboy Bebop: Supernova Swing

There are some things you just don't remake. You don't make *Casablanca* into a series on The CW. You don't make *Citizen Kane* into a stage play for teens. And you don't turn *Cowboy Bebop* into a live-action drama. Netflix already made this unfortunate mistake, but gave up before it could do additional damage to the legendary anime's honor. Casting missteps, awful character

designs, and baffling narrative decisions made the series a non-starter and ultimately contributed to its quick (and merciful) cancellation.

When it comes to the comic adaptation of the live-action version of *Cowboy Bebop*, the bar has already been set abysmally low. How can the comic succeed where the TV series couldn't? Easy: it has a much better writer. While this vision of the *Cowboy Bebop* universe is stuck with the live-action versions of the characters, sans Ed, it manages to reproduce the elements that made the anime a hit. This tie-in is by far as better attempt at a Western version of the *Bebop* crew's exploits.

Writer Dan Watters translates the core concepts from *Bebop* and transcends the misguided ideas in the Netflix series to create something more than worth reading. This all-new story, set in the year 2171, finds Spike Spiegel, Faye Valentine, and Jet Black working together to run down an ex-gang member with a special vest that gives its wearer unlimited luck. The story beats aren't anything to write home about on their own, but each member of the crew gets something unique to do that fits their personalities.

The dialogue is solid, too. Spike is grim when it counts, but cocky and full of swagger depending on the situation. Jet is the rock of the group, as usual, but not without his own frustrations and personal issues. Faye is much more like the bombshell she was in the anime, with no obnoxious behavior or strings of quirky curse words to replace her original brand of charm. The entire story is more lighthearted and accessible, even to newcomers who aren't familiar with any previous version of *Cowboy Bebop*.

Unfortunately, while Watters' writing is up to the task of crafting a sparkling new *Bebop* adventure, Lamar Mathurin's illustrations aren't quite there. While Mathurin's style works well

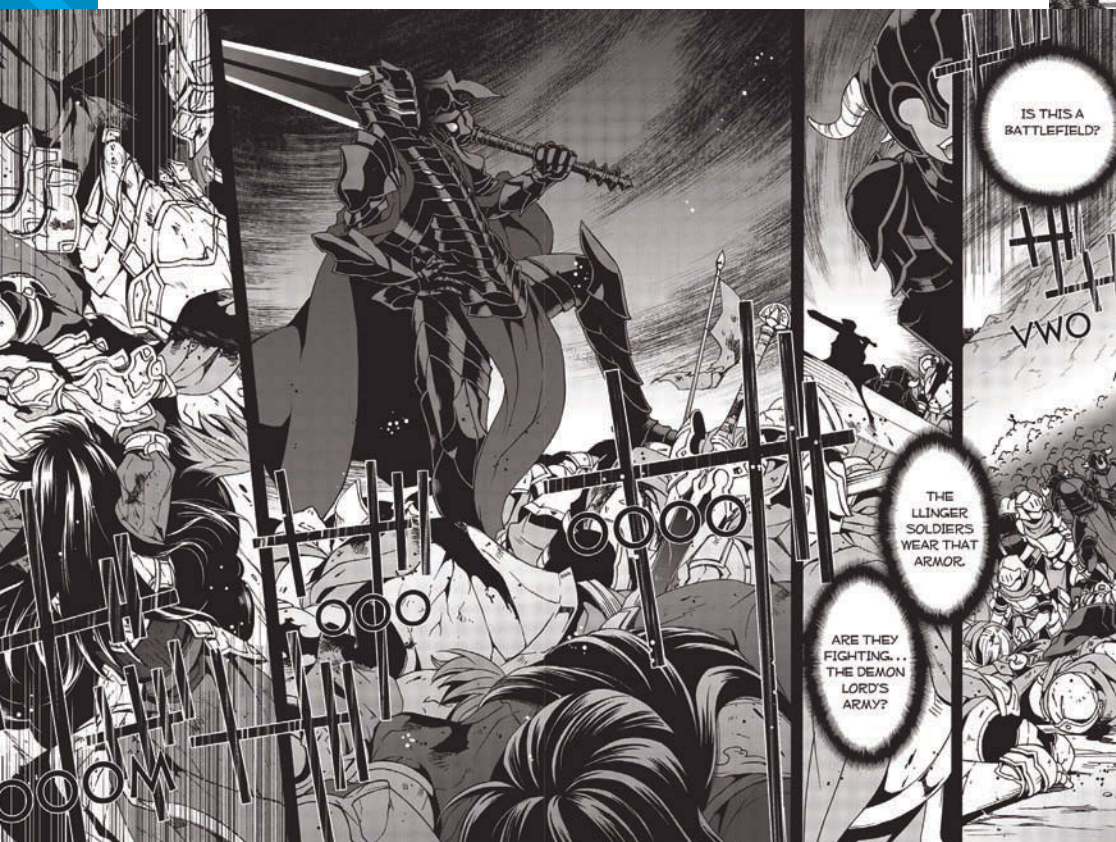


for his webcomic and other projects, it lends an unfinished feeling to this comic. For the most part, the art doesn't even try to make the characters resemble their live-action counterparts. That's a blessing in some ways, since readers get to enjoy the original costumes from the anime, but if this is supposed to be a tie-in, perhaps the cast should look more like themselves.

But that's a small nitpick when it comes to the overall quality of this adaptation. It could have

heroes who can save them from the Demon Lord. Sadly, Usato was dragged along by accident.

Still, it's not a total loss: Usato turns out to have a singular talent for healing magic. This seems like a net positive, but, as healing mages can't use other forms of magic, they aren't held in as high regard as other spellcasters. When Rose, captain of the Kingdom Rescue



a chainmail bikini. Some of the action sequences could use a few more panels for clarity, but on the whole the pages are highly readable.

While Usato dominates the plot, his two schoolmates receive woefully little attention. Poor, bland Kazuki gets the least development, but the character who demands more focus is Suzune. On the surface she's a cool, collected popular girl, but on the inside she's a massive nerd who couldn't be happier to be living in a fantasy world. She's excited from the get-go and can't wait to star in her own D&D campaign. For fans of the light novel series or newcomers who prefer their fantasy in manga form, *The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic* is an enchanting addition to a bookshelf. (Che Gilson)



## The Art and Making of Transformers: War for Cybertron Trilogy

They say if you want to do a story right, you have to take from the very top, and that's exactly what *Transformers: War for Cybertron Trilogy* sets out to do. It tells the story of the final days of the war that plagued the techno-

logical home planet of the Autobots and the Decepticons. We saw snippets of this at the start of the film *Bumblebee*, but never has this particular chapter in the iconic series been told in animated form until now. It's a story told over three movies—*Siege*, *Earthrise*, and *Kingdom*—the last leading directly into the 25th anniversary of the iconic *Beast Wars* spinoff.

This companion art book gives you an incredible look behind the scenes at the conception, development, character design, and finishing touches of this exhilarating trilogy, providing a generous selection of art emphasizing the painstaking detail that went into crafting the technological world of Cybertron, the colorful realms of space, and the harsh wilderness of prehistoric Earth. Among the hundreds of pieces

been just as confoundingly bland as the series. Instead, the creative team took what they were given and absolutely ran with it. It's a shame that a writer like Watters couldn't have been tapped for the show. With his understanding of what makes *Bebop* tick, the series might still be alive and well, inviting fans new and old to come into its cosmic world. At the very least, maybe Faye wouldn't have been as stereotypically girlbossy. (Brittany Vincent)

## The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic: The Manga Companion

One fateful day, average student Usato forgets his umbrella. He receives the offer of a loaner from Kazuki Ryusen, the student council vice president. As they walk home, they're joined by student council president Suzune Inukami. The three of them aren't very close, but their rainy-day walk home takes a turn for the fantastical as the trio is summoned to another world. The Kingdom of Llinger is under siege and, as a last resort, has summoned Kazuki and Suzune, prophesied



<b>PUBLISHER</b>
One Peace
<b>MANGA</b>
Kugayama Reki
<b>ORIGINAL STORY</b>
Kurokata
<b>CHARACTER DESIGN</b>
KeG
<b>RATING</b>
Unrated/Teen

Team and scourge of the royal knights, gets wind of the existence of a high-level healer, she immediately commandeers Usato for her team. Her brutal training puts Usato through hell, breaking his body. But as he's forced to constantly heal himself, he builds muscle and stamina for the trials ahead.

*The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic* has a great combination of action, intrigue, and fantasy. The art is stylish and well-produced, with smooth inks complemented by screentone shading and solid blacks. Each character looks unique, probably thanks to the character designs ported over from the original light novel. Rose, in particular, is a great-looking character, and it's nice to see a female warrior dressed in something more practical than





Wolf and Red BL Hood: ©Kotaro Kobayashi, Ume Yamada 2022

of artwork are conceptual designs, simple sketches, frames from key moments in the series, marketing art, and fleshed-out character designs. Deserving of particular praise is the section dedicated to the last installment, *Kingdom*, and the return of the *Beast Wars* characters. Having grown up with the *Beast Wars* toys, just seeing the Maximals and the Predacons in the spotlight again after so long is touching.

The book also includes special interviews with the creators, producers, artists, and voice actors, providing insight into key moments and characters. It's clear that the people involved in this trilogy had a blast developing *Transformers* lore into a new project. Again, the introduction of the Maximals and the Predacons is a highlight here. Reading about the process of bringing these characters to life and have them interact with the original G1 characters feels like watch-

ing a group of kids open a toybox full of classic toys. All in all, this book is an excellent companion for any *Transformers* fan, especially those with plenty of *Beast Wars* nostalgia. (Michael Goldstein)



**PUBLISHER**  
Kobunsha BL

**STORY AND ART**  
Kotaru Kobayashi and  
Ume Yamada

**RATING**  
18+

### Wolf and Little BL Red Hood

Fractured fairy tales get a yaoi twist in *Wolf and Little BL Red Hood*. The book hits (smacks, ties up, and boinks) all the classics for your yaoi viewing pleasure. Most of the stories are Western fairy tales retold with lusty seme and protesting uke (prepare for a lot of dubious consent), but the book touches on some

Japanese tales as well, such as one about a naughty tanuki and the rabbit who punishes him.

It's fun to see a volume of shorts linked by a theme, which is more unusual in manga than one would guess. One of the more boundary-pushing stories involves Hansel and Gretel as brothers. Gretel, who pretends to be innocent, has his sights set on Hansel, who is too dumb to figure out what Gretel is doing and is equally baffled when the (male) witch in the gingerbread house ties him up. Another standout is a bizarre and hilarious take on Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," featuring a trash-talking, dirty-minded Gerda looking for naïve, innocent Kai who has been kidnapped by the Snow Queen.

The saucy (nipple) tweaks given to the classics are amusing, but overall the book is a little lackluster. Perhaps it's the heavy self-censoring on the art or the creators' obsession with nipple play, but the book doesn't come off as BDSM enough to be satisfyingly naughty or funny enough to be laugh-out-loud hilarious. The imbalance of the two elements weakens both just enough to water down the entire production.

Despite the mediocre sex scenes, which are at least plentiful, the art is very good. The characters' appearances vary nicely, and they have a more mature, handsome look than the typical boyish BL protagonists. The backgrounds are full of sparkly screentones that add whimsy to the fantastical elements and smexy sex. The backgrounds may not be too detailed, but this isn't a book where scene-setting is super important, and the panels pack a lot of action into a small space. The stories are well-paced, with the exception of "The Kachi-Kachi Mountain Bunny's Punishment," which drags on for a long time with little payoff until the very end.

Some BL fans will find this collection unsatisfying, but if you're a fan of funny fantasy and light BDSM with an emphasis on "light," this is 100 percent your book. (Che Gilson)



**PUBLISHER**  
Viz Media

**STORY AND ART**  
Rokuro Ogaki

**RATING**  
Mature

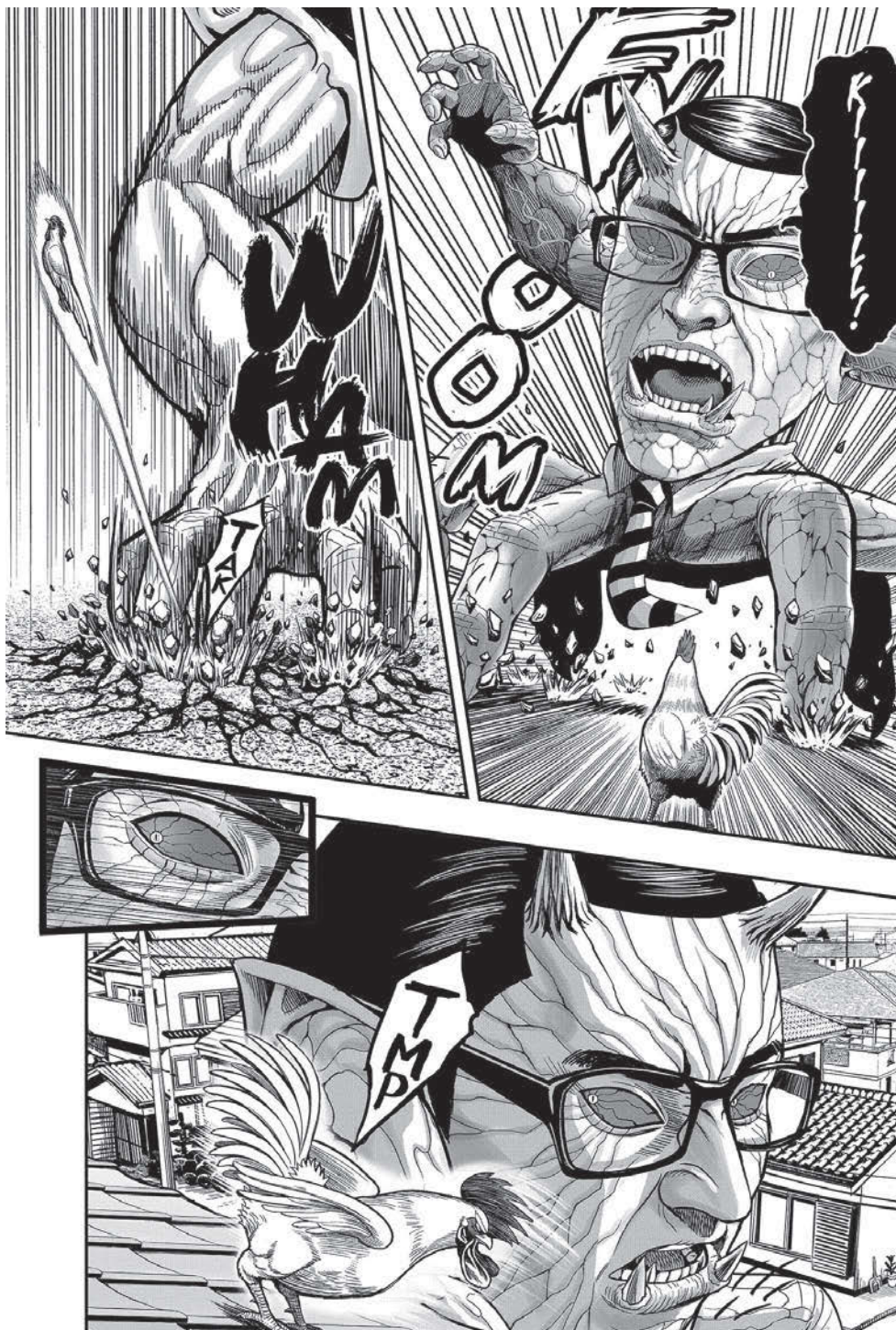
### Crazy Food Truck

*Crazy Food Truck* is exactly the sort of thing I wish was the staple of my Japanese comics diet, which is to say it's pure junk food and has no aspirations toward being anything else. It's a post-apocalyptic super-powered assassin cooking manga with lots of shooting, giant monsters, explosions, martial arts, delectable shots of sandwiches, and wanton nudity

from a gorgeous busty dark-skinned babe. In other words, it's got everything I truly want.

Gordon Goliath—perfect middle-aged dad name—drives across the desert wasteland in his food truck, making delicious meals out of exotic ingredients and consistently failing to get cus-





*Food Wars!* recipes, they aren't necessarily adapted to involve reasonably attainable/real-life ingredients. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY AND ART

Shu Sakuratani

RATING

Teen +

## Rooster Fighter

If you ever read *One Punch Man* and thought it would be immeasurably improved if the main character was a chicken, you will be delighted to know that *Rooster Fighter* fills this highly specific gap in your manga library. Created by Shu Sakuratani and published by Viz, *Rooster Fighter* is a seinen action title featuring arguably the toughest farm animal ever illustrated

in manga. Standing resolute against a backdrop of wanton destruction, this feathered protector might be the only hope for our world to survive an onslaught of giant monsters.

For Keiji the rooster, the invasion is a personal matter. His quest for vengeance takes him all over Japan as he gathers clues pointing towards the creature that killed his sister. Along the way, he encounters humans and animals who have also suffered at the hands of the grotesque “demons” that plague the world. Although Keiji is a wandering loner, his hard-



tomers. Then he finds a body bag in the middle of the road containing an alive yet fully naked young woman: wide-eyed innocent Arisa, who's got a colossal appetite, a penchant for not remaining clothed for very long, and military forces on her tail because she happens to be a deadly genetically engineered super-soldier. As it turns out, Gordon is a former general on the run from the military himself, so his food truck is laden with hidden firepower! As I've learned from movies starring Richard Harrison wearing a colorful ninja outfit with NINJA written on the headband, “Gordon” is also the ideal name for

an old master warrior. Crazy indeed.

Praise be to “rock and roll” author Rokuro Ogaki for somehow managing to combine the delicious fantasy food adventures of *Toriko* (or *Monster Hunter*, if you prefer) with *Black Lagoon*-esque gunfights and *Mad Max* vehicle mayhem. *Crazy Food Truck* is a short series—three volumes total—so it's guaranteed to leave you hungry (and um, thirsty). There are little bonus recipes at the back of each volume for some of the meals, though, unlike the



ened personality hides a deep sense of justice and compassion for the weak. Keiji isn't perfect, and he's prone to sleeping around with hens and pooping in the streets, but his heart is open to assisting anyone in need.

*Rooster Fighter* blends a range of tropes from gangster films and battle manga into a ridiculous parody where the fate of the world hinges on a single chicken. The manga works through variations on its one gag while teasing a more elaborate backstory to the sudden rise of the oddly human-like monsters, all of whom seem tormented by the failures and shortcomings of their hosts. For now, each chapter tells its own self-contained story and typically climaxes with a confrontation between Keiji and a monster that's appeared out of nowhere to terrorize the local populace. After saving the day, the rooster moves on, perhaps having grown a little with every life that he changes in the places he leaves behind.

For seasoned manga readers, *Rooster Fighter* won't blow anyone's mind, but it's a fun read that is best appreciated as a palate cleanser after binging on a pile of heavy, serious manga. The bird puns are kept to a minimum, thankfully, with the script dropping them in only at the precise time they're needed. The artwork throughout is solid; the manga artist comes very close to convincing me that roosters can have rippling muscles and furled brows. There's not a lot to chew on once the novelty of the premise wears off, so hopefully *Rooster Fighter* finds a compelling storyline beyond its current monster-of-the-week format to keep readers hooked past the first volume. (David Estrella)



**PUBLISHER**  
Viz Media

**STORY AND ART**  
Tatsuki Fujimoto

**RATING**  
Teen +

### Look Back

When Tatsuki Fujimoto concluded *Chainsaw Man* in 2020—or, rather, “Part 1” now that the series has resumed—he diverted his energies toward one-shot manga that had nothing to do with fighting whatsoever. The first and perhaps most exceptional—all were stellar—was *Look Back*, a heart-wrenching coming-of-age masterpiece.

Fujino is an aspiring manga artist in fourth grade, making crudely-drawn gag comics for the student paper. That's how she indirectly encounters a reclusive shut-in classmate, Kyomoto, whose background artwork is substantially more advanced. Unable to accept the obvious skill gap, Fujino commits to learning to draw...for years and years, at the exclusion of other pursuits. Yet the gap never closes; dismayed, Fujino quits drawing. Then, at middle school graduation, Fujino and Kyomoto finally meet ... and it turns out Kyomoto has been Fujino's greatest fan all along!

A dynamic teenage girl manga duo is born,

and as “Kyo Fujino” gains recognition over the years with a variety of one-shots, the incredibly shy Kyomoto begins to gradually open herself to going outside and speaking more. But then Kyomoto opts to quit manga and go off to art college while Fujino launches her solo manga *Shark Kick* (clearly reminiscent of Fujimoto's own series *Fire Punch* and *Chainsaw Man*). When tragedy strikes, our heroine can't help but, well, look back at their lost friendship and partnership. As in real life, there's no catharsis, just wondering if things could have gone differently somewhere before finally learning to move on. Read enough Fujimoto manga and you notice that trend throughout his work.

With *Chainsaw Man* resuming and its hotly-anticipated anime adaptation imminent, Fujimoto is poised to be one of the biggest names in action manga. *Look Back* offers a look at his other side. It feels real and emotionally raw in a way reminiscent of Inio Asano's work, giving the impression that the author is making a personal confession obfuscated within layers of fiction. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)

### Thus Spoke Rohan Kishibe

*Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Diamond Is Unbreakable* may have originally concluded in 1995, but the hardcover English-language editions from Viz just finished up last year, so it's only fitting that we get dessert after the main course. *Thus Spoke Rohan Kishibe* is a collection of four short one-shot stories from Hirohiko Araki, each featuring his thinly-disguised self-insertion character, Rohan Kishibe (Araki denies he's a self-insert, but he also denies being an immortal vampire and we know that's not true). Rohan is a superpowered manga artist whose Stand, Heaven's Door, enables him to literally read people like books and even rewrite their behavior. The stories in this volume, naturally, never bother to



**PUBLISHER**  
Viz Media

**STORY AND ART**  
Hirohiko Araki

**RATING**  
Teen +

explain this premise.

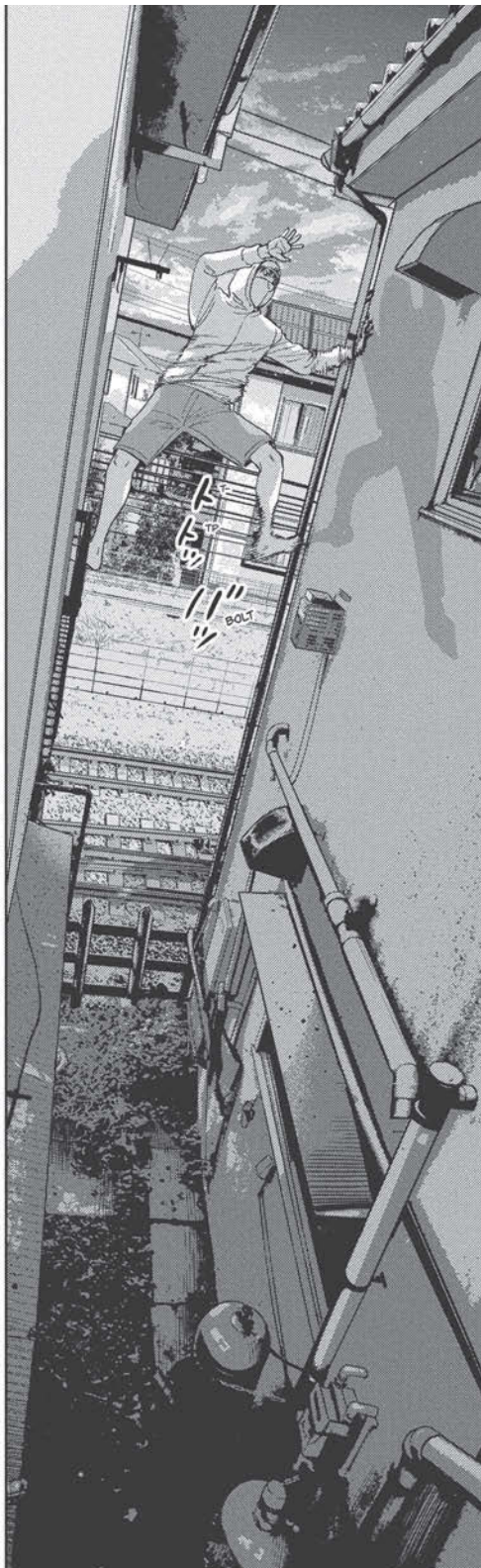
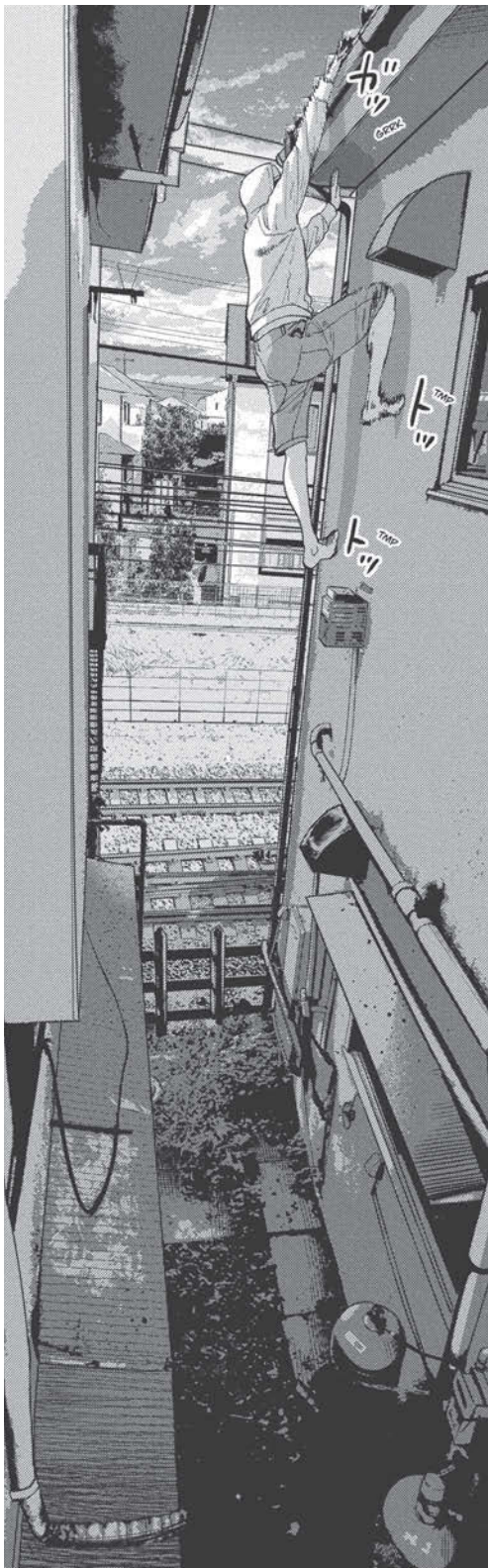
In the first two stories, Rohan is primarily a narrator relaying a strange supernatural tale to the reader. There's little involving the *Jojo* characters or world at all, as if Araki's editors told him to write something non-*Jojo* but he just couldn't help himself. What transpires in these stories is par for the course if you read enough Araki

manga: the first is about life-or-death popcorn catching, while the second involves a corpse that just won't decay or stop bleeding.



Thus Spoke Rohan Kishibe: KISHIBE ROHAN WA UGOKANAI  
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**PUBLISHER**  
Denpa

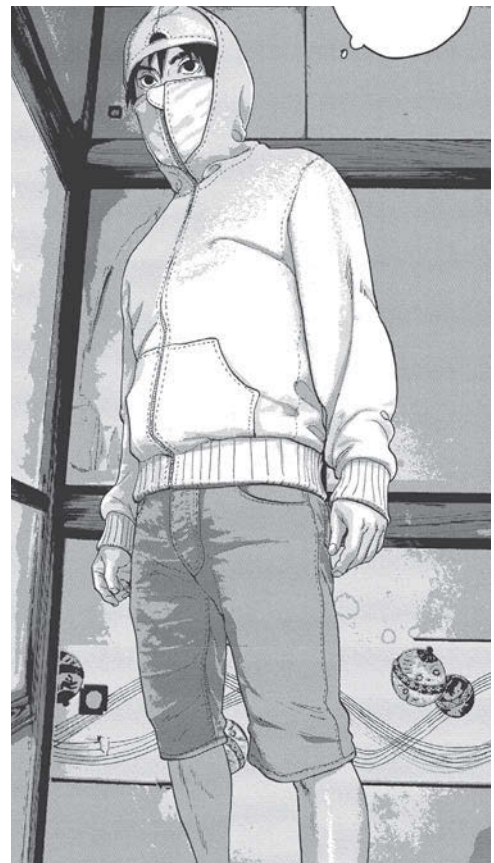
**STORY AND ART**  
Kengo Hanazawa

**RATING**  
Unrated/Older Teen

secretly hundreds of thousands of ninja in the modern world, but while a few super-elites are out there fighting in wars, the remaining 90% are unable to find sustainable levels of ninja work and are largely ignored. See that fat, balding homeless guy who allegedly harvests breast milk? He may get beaten up by schoolchildren, but he's actually a deadly ninja assassin!

Kurou Kumogakure is just another destitute Gen Z/millennial ninja until he gets an assignment to infiltrate a high school and is granted a special highly advanced ninja outfit. Kurou continually mooches off his neighbor, who inadvertently steals their perpetually drunken landlady's underwear, then starts wearing it to keep it out of the hands of the neighborhood drone-piloting panty-thief kid. Meanwhile, an awkward Russian who speaks broken Japanese arrives in Japan, determined to find the secret world of ninja and learn their techniques. In the course of this quest, he goes around performing, um, involuntary penectomies, because he is, in fact, an assassin with a daughter being held hostage.

*Under Ninja* is more about exploring the lives of these idiosyncratic weirdos than plot advancement. There's some bloody violence and perverted behavior, but it's a low-key seinen comedy first and foremost. Remember: if you need to evade detection by hiding in a crawlspace, you can pass the time by watching the extended editions of *Lord of the Rings*! **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



By contrast, the third and fourth chapters may as well be bonus chapters of *Diamond Is Unbreakable*. Rohan not only explores a strange etiquette-obsessed village, but in the final and best tale teams up with Tonio, everybody's favorite Italian chef whose Stand, Pearl Jam (or "Pole Jam," as it's renamed in the Viz manga), produces delicious food that heals one's ailments after seemingly obliterating the body in sickening fashion. These side stories have yet to be adapted into anime, but there are still more for Viz to publish: the latest Rohan story came out in Japan only this year! (Daryl Surat)

### Under Ninja

Kengo Hanazawa has been one of my favorite manga-ka since 2004's *Ressentiment*, an extraordinarily bleak take on otaku and virtual worlds which nobody to this day dares officially release in English. His more recent *I Am a Hero* catapulted him to stardom, and now Denpa is releasing his newest series, *Under Ninja*. To describe the premise as "ninja in modern Japan" would be technically correct yet woefully incomplete, for Hanazawa loves social outcasts and the forgotten members of society.

In the opening chapters, we learn there are



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# OTAKUUSA

## MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.



### BLACK PARADOX

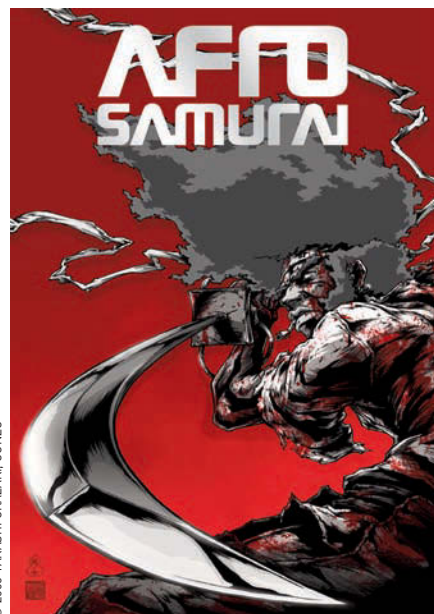
PAGE 39

Story and Art by Junji Ito

Four people intent on killing themselves meet through the suicide website Black Paradox: Maruso, a nurse who despairs about the future; Taburo, a man who is tortured by his doppel-ganger; Pii-tan, an engineer with his own robot clone; and Baracchi, a woman who agonizes about the birthmark on her face.

They wander together in search of the perfect death, fatefully opening a door that leads them to a rather bizarre destiny...

**Available now!**



### AFRO SAMURAI

PAGE 55

Story and Art by Takashi Okazaki

In a feudal, futuristic Japan, samurai battle to become No.1 and rule the world, but when his father, who holds the coveted position, is challenged and killed, the young Afro Samurai vows vengeance. Relentlessly pursued by murderous assassins, will he stay alive long enough to keep his promise?

In the first of two volumes, we see the beginnings of young Afro's quest, his battles with an array of assassins and warlords, that climaxes in the epic confrontation with the powerful Empty Seven Clan and a showdown with an old enemy...

This new creator-approved "director's cut" edition of the out-of-print cult classic book features specially commissioned custom covers and a brand-new foreword by Takashi Okazaki.

**Available now!**

**Note:** To read Afro Samurai, you will need to flip the magazine back to "right side up," because it reads in the traditional Western left-to-right format.



Chapter 2 .....  
**A PECULIAR PYJOURS**

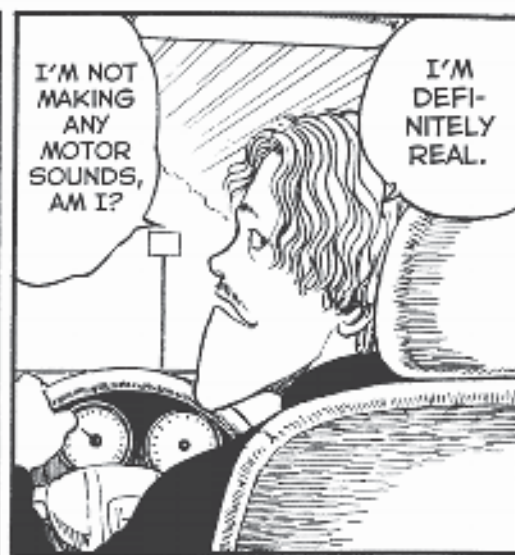






I'M NO ILLUSION.

HMPH, I'M REAL. GO ON, TOUCH ME.



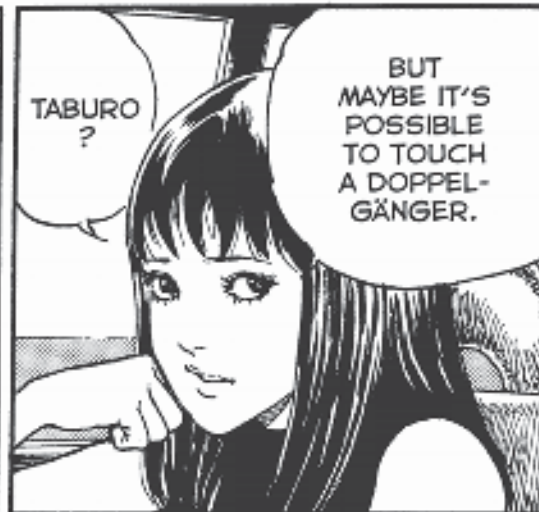
I'M NOT MAKING ANY MOTOR SOUNDS, AM I?

I'M DEFINITELY REAL.



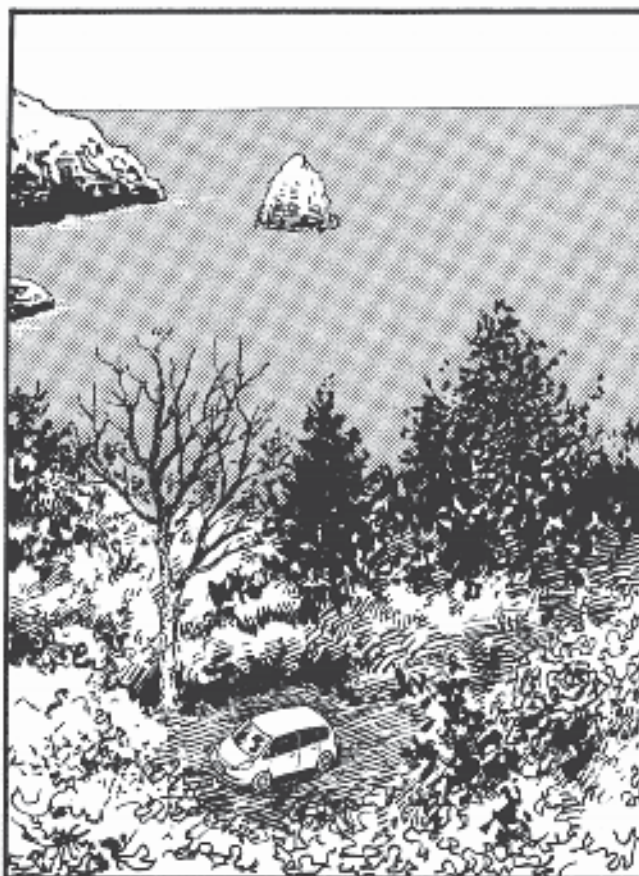
AND BARACCHI COULD BE ONE OF AN INFINITE NUMBER OF BARACCHIS IN MIRRORS FACING EACH OTHER!

WELL, IF YOU'RE GOING TO TALK LIKE THAT, THEN MAYBE PII-TAN WAS IMPROVED SO HIS MOTORS ARE SILENT NOW.



TABURO ?

BUT MAYBE IT'S POSSIBLE TO TOUCH A DOPPELGÄNGER.



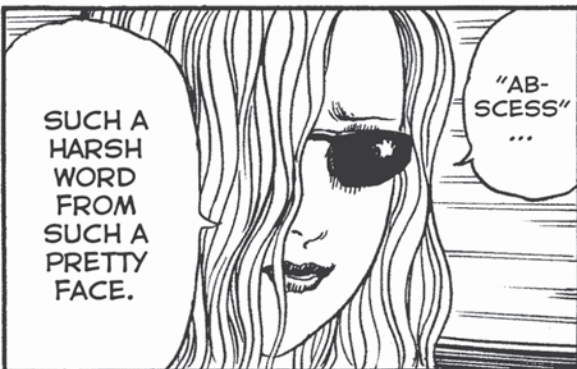
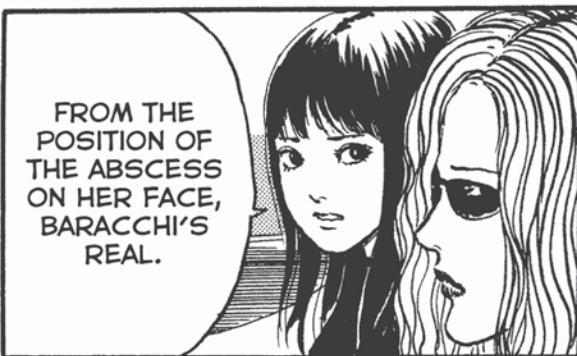
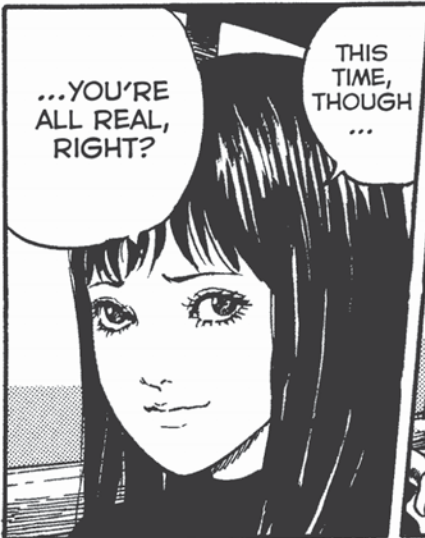
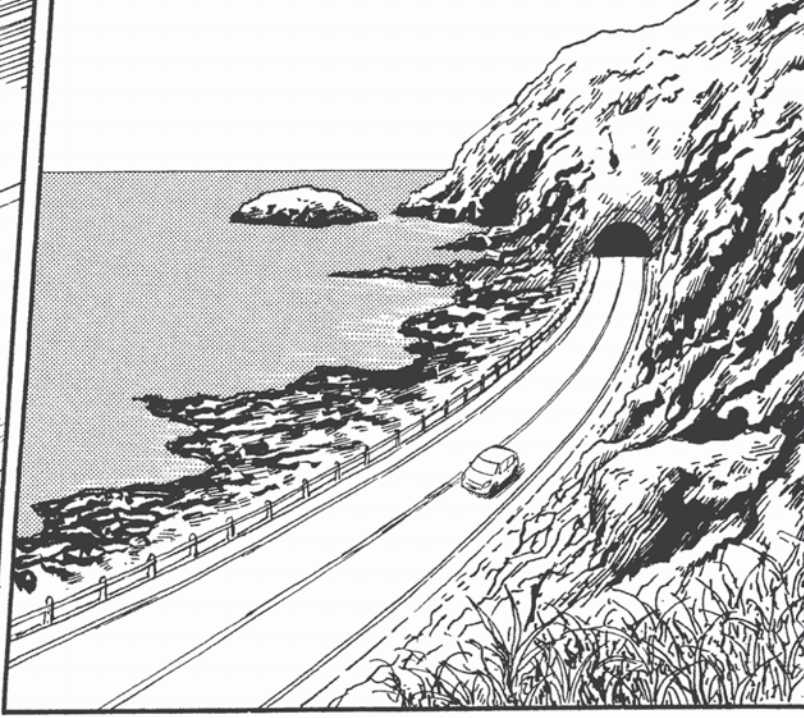
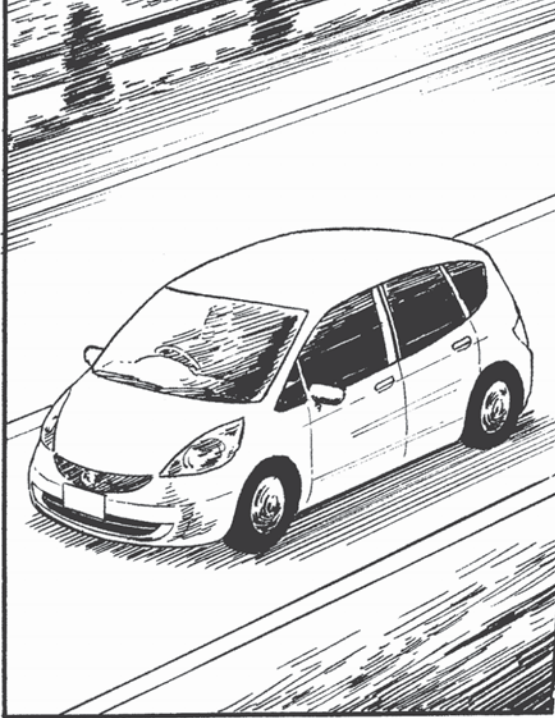
YES. AND ABOVE ALL ELSE, IS THIS EVEN THE REAL MARUSO SAYING ALL THIS?



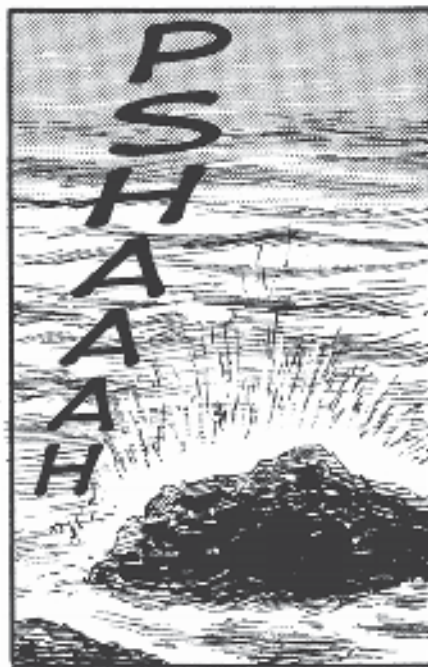
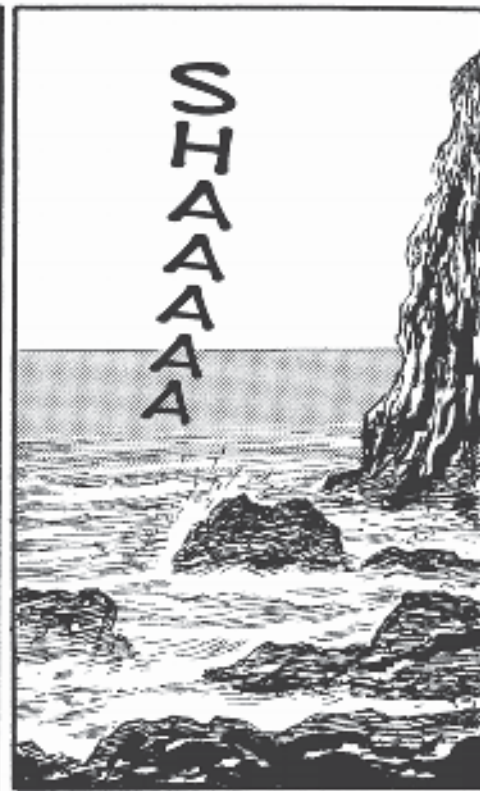
I SUPPOSE. I DO SORT OF REGRET COMING.

I MEAN, IT'S STRANGE. YOU HAD SUCH A SCARY EXPERIENCE LAST TIME, AND YET HERE YOU ARE AGAIN.

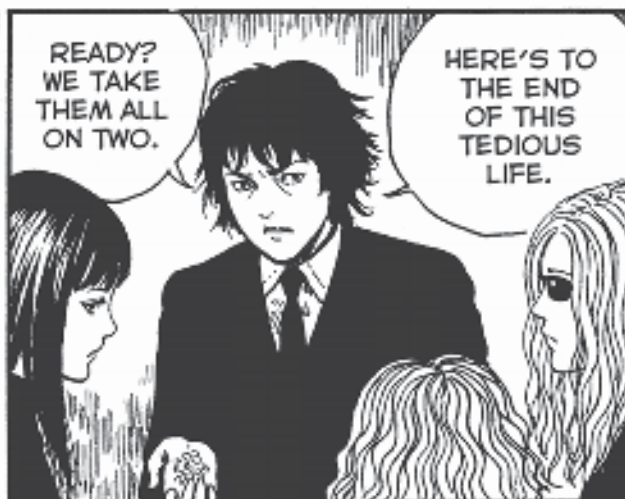
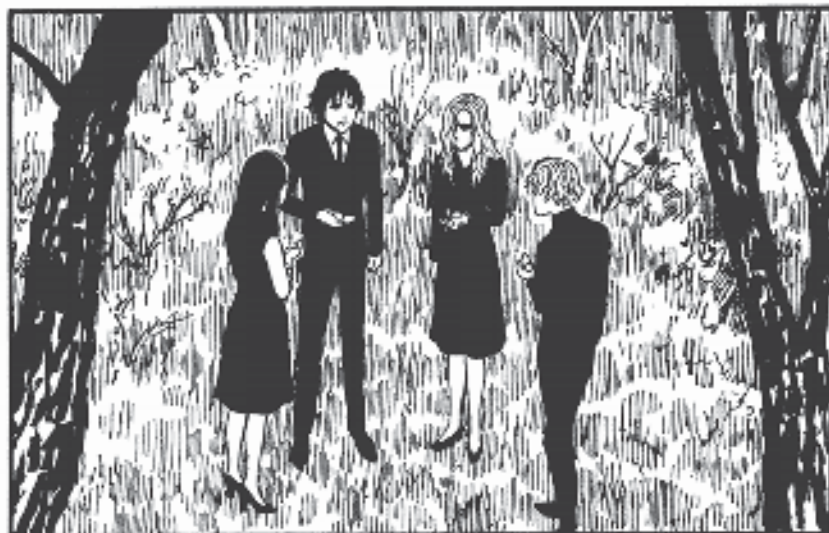




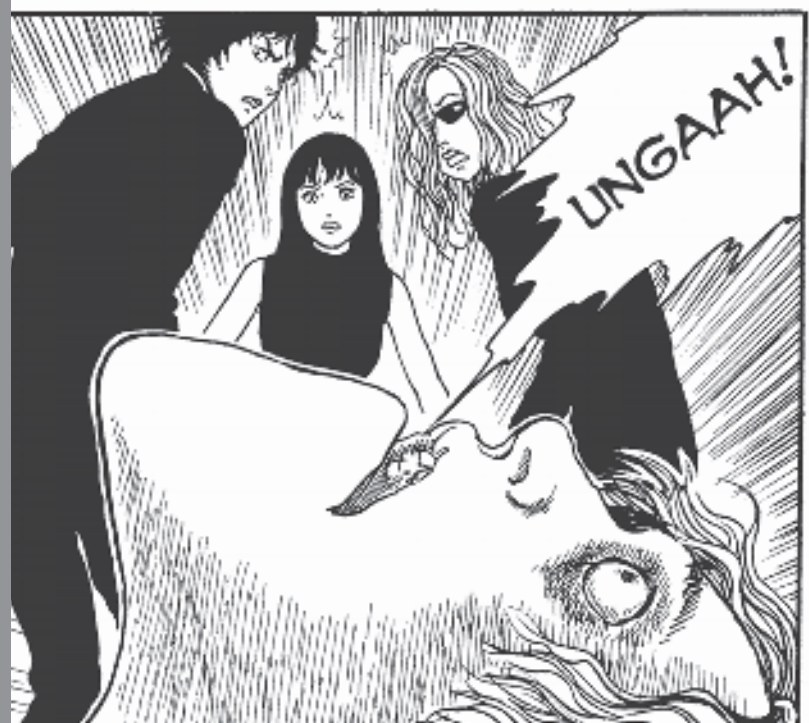
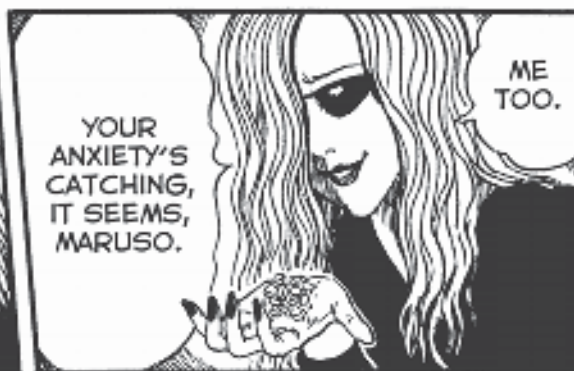
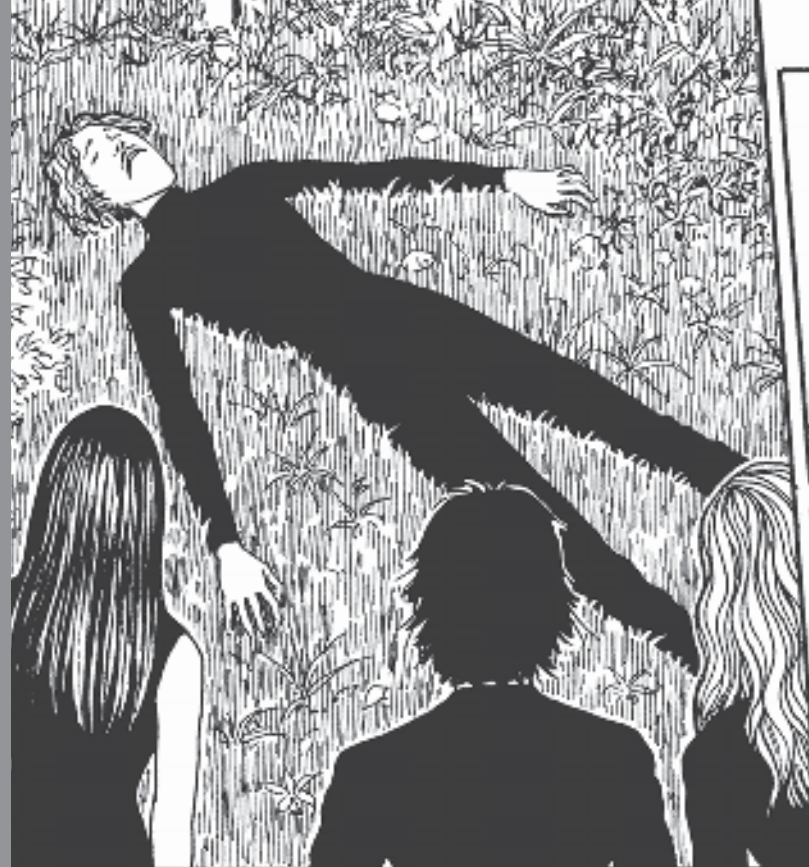








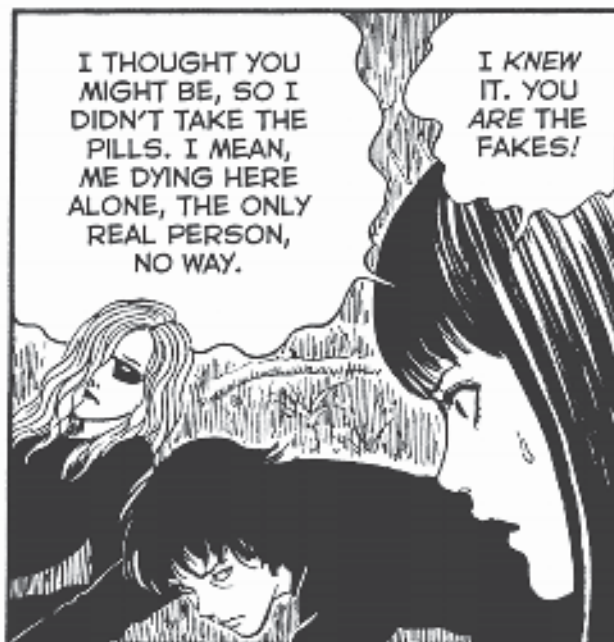
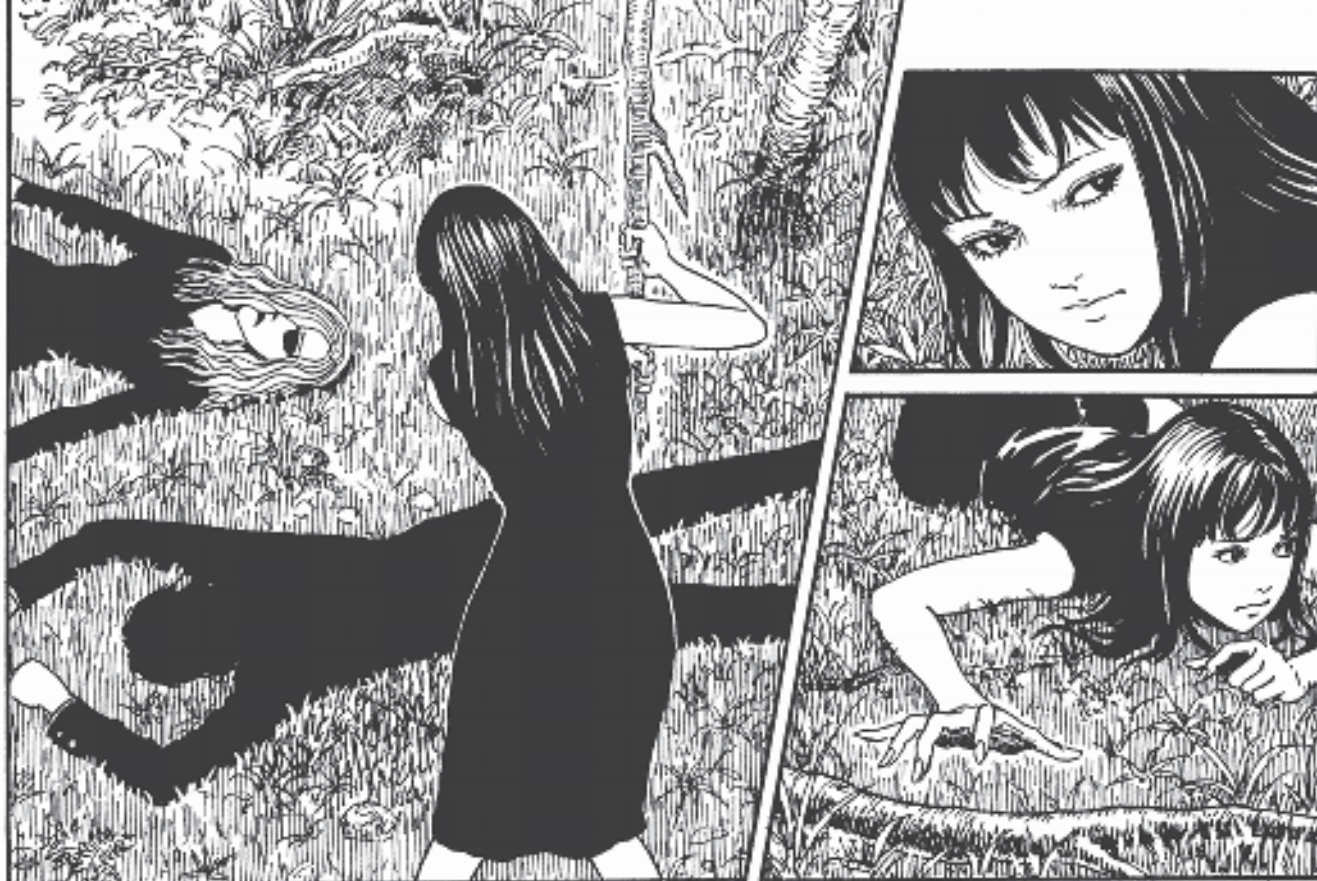




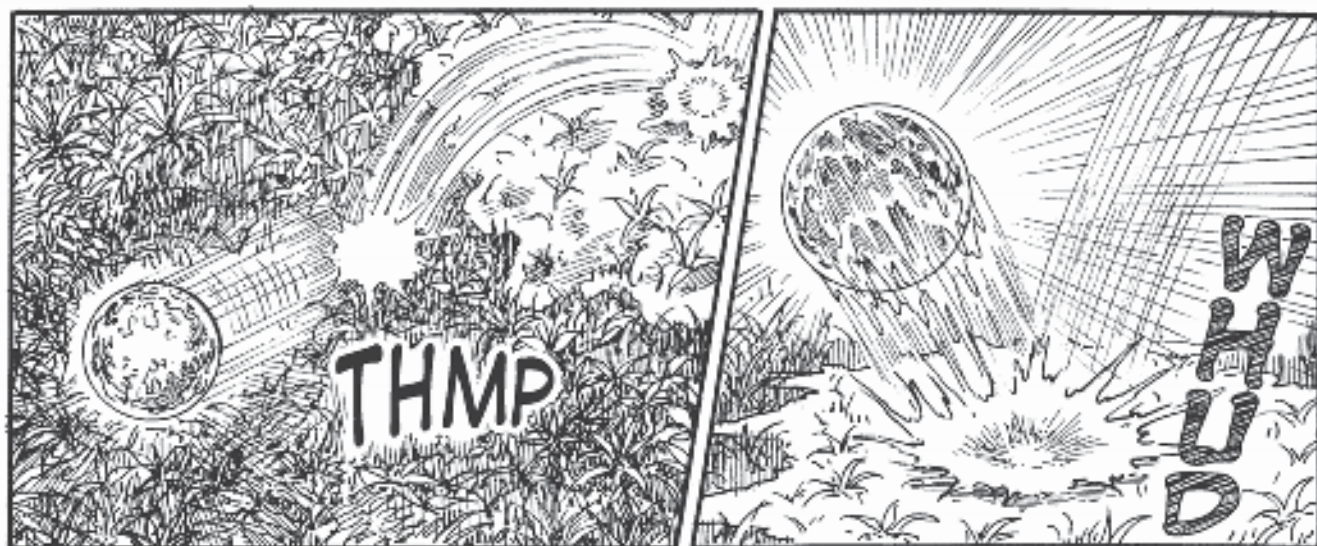


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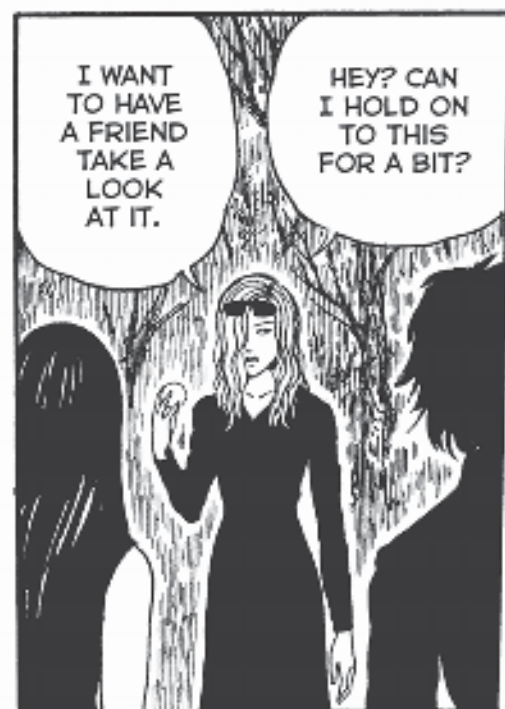
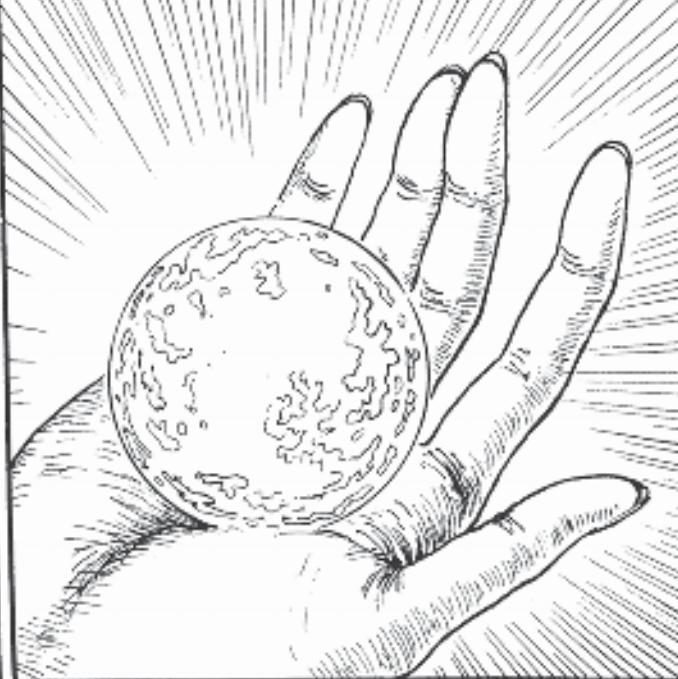
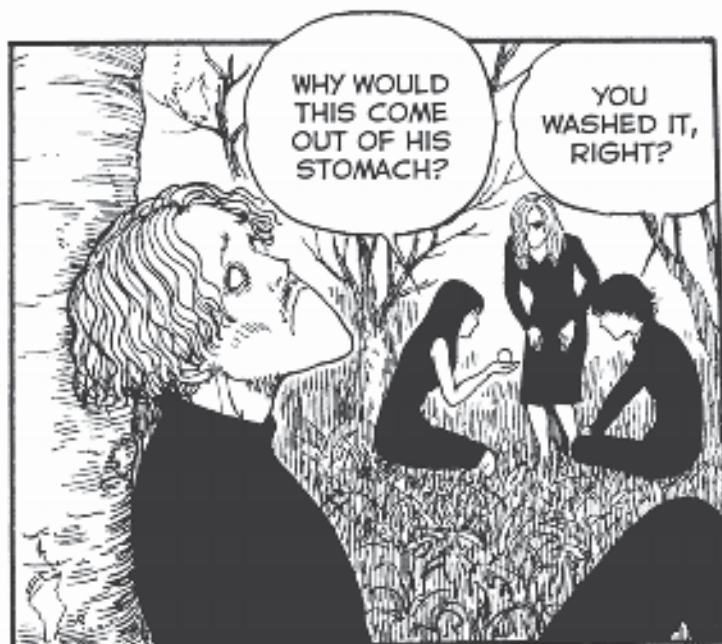




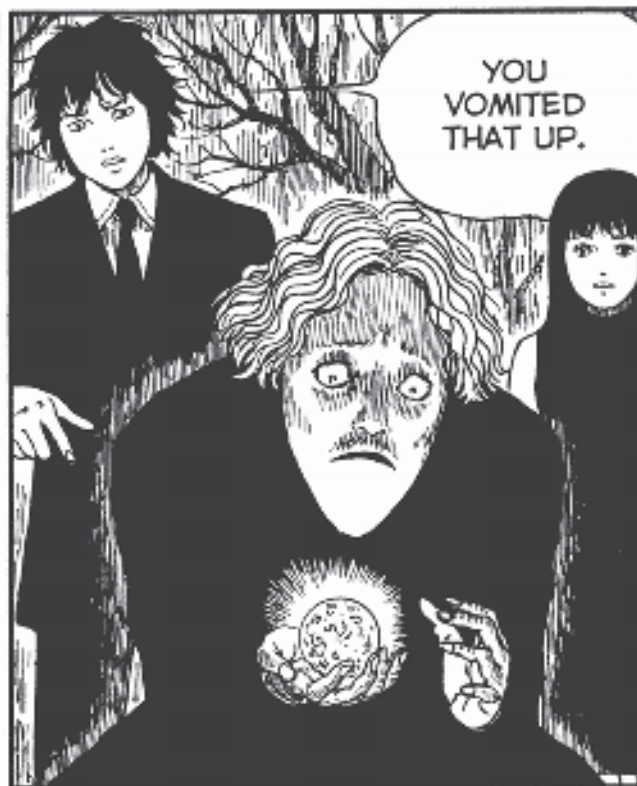
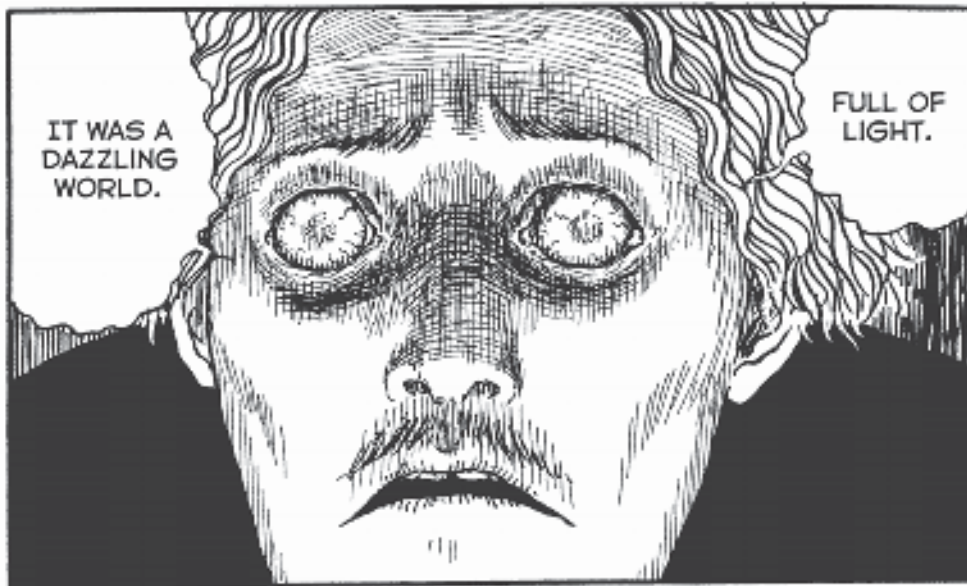




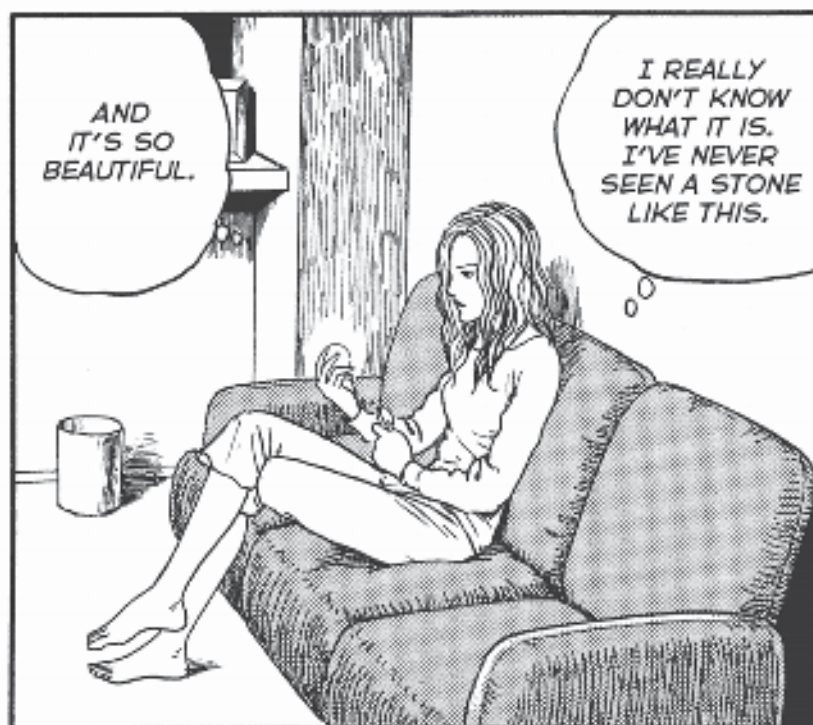




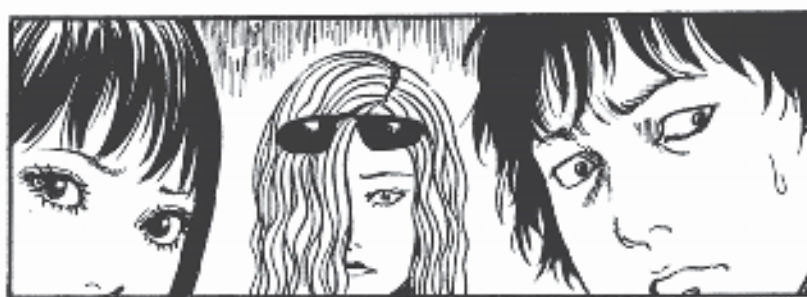
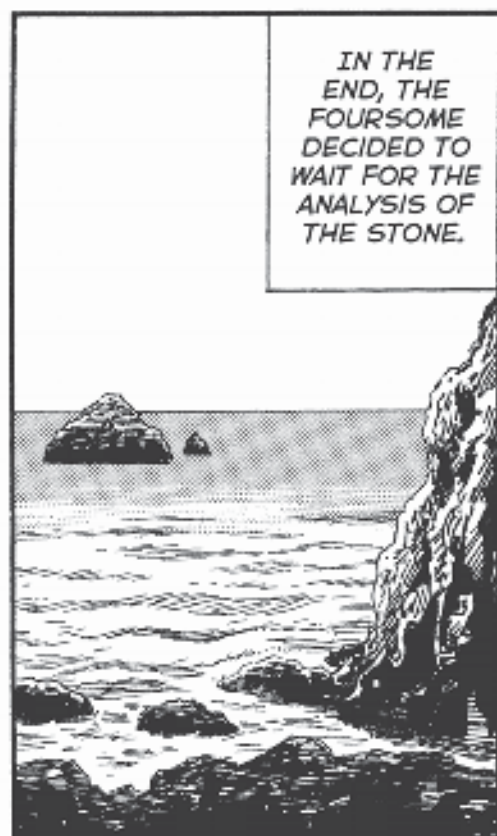
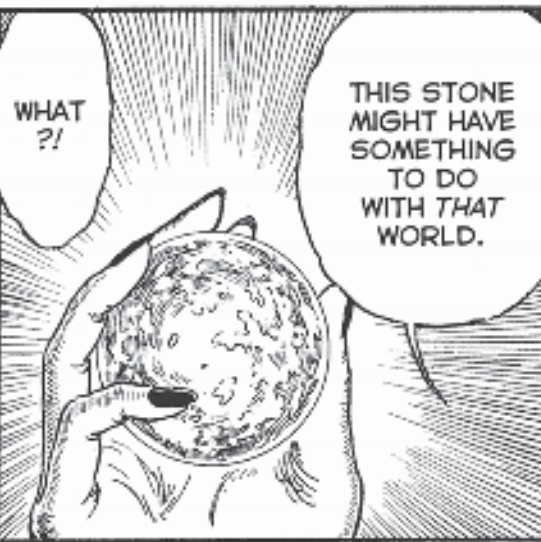
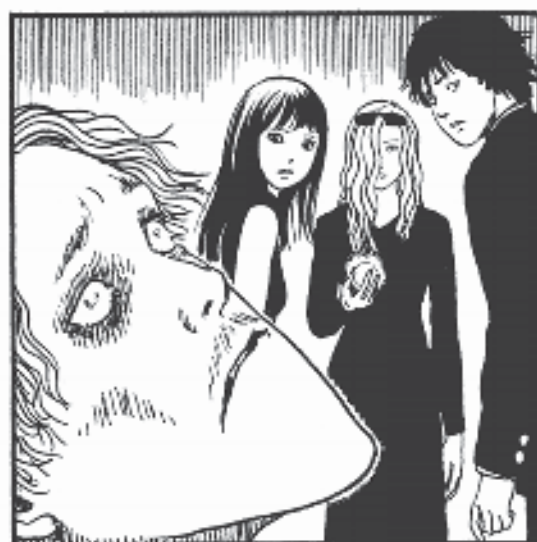
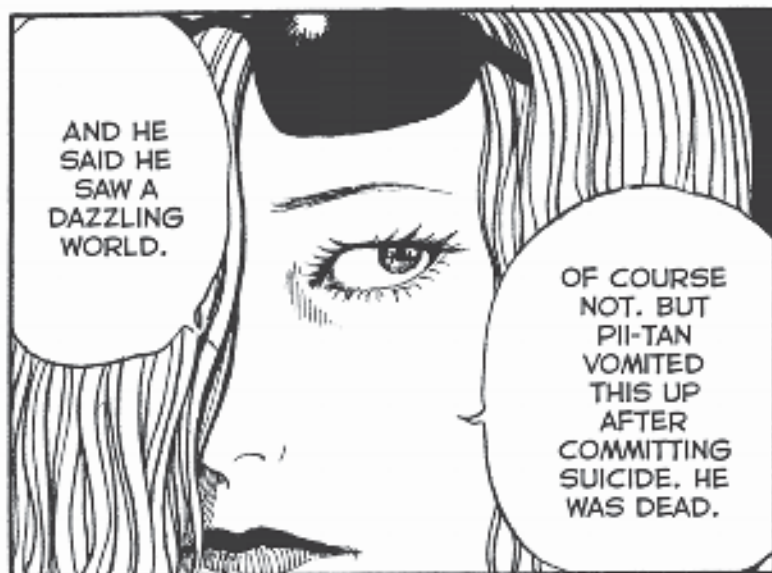




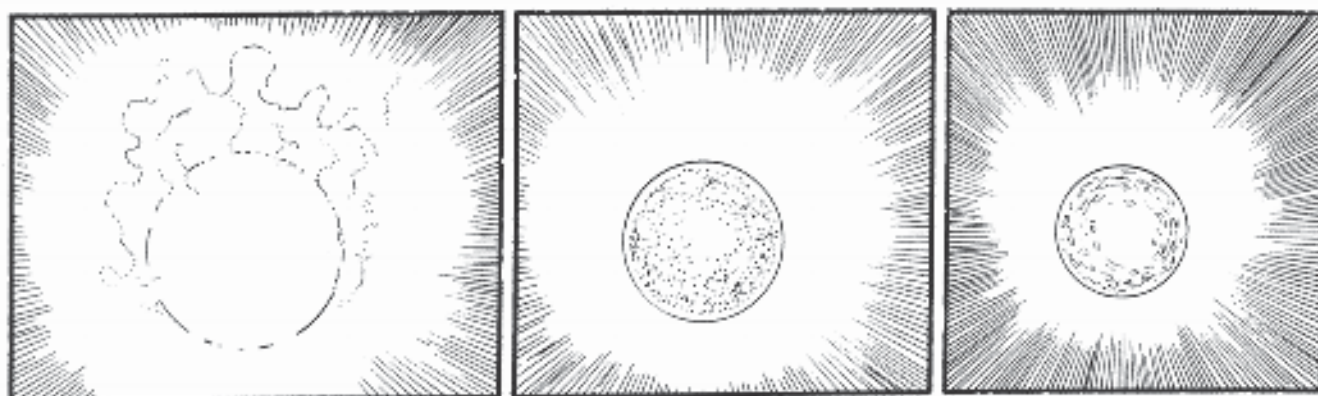








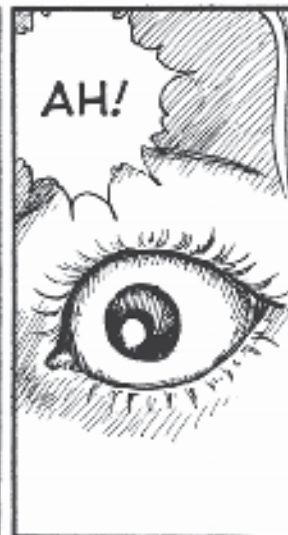
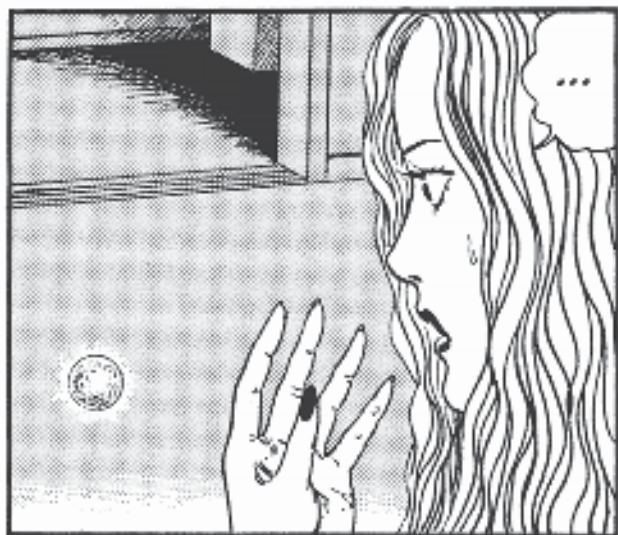
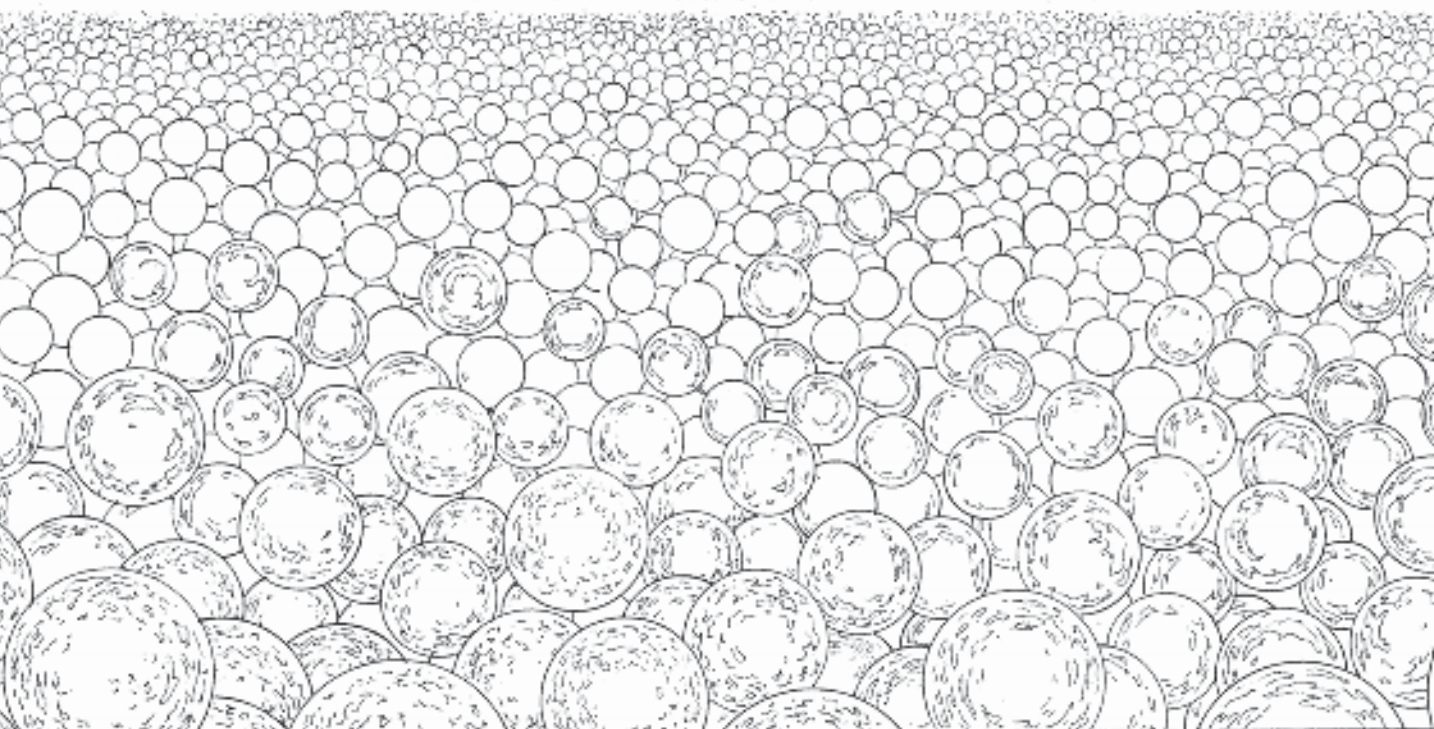
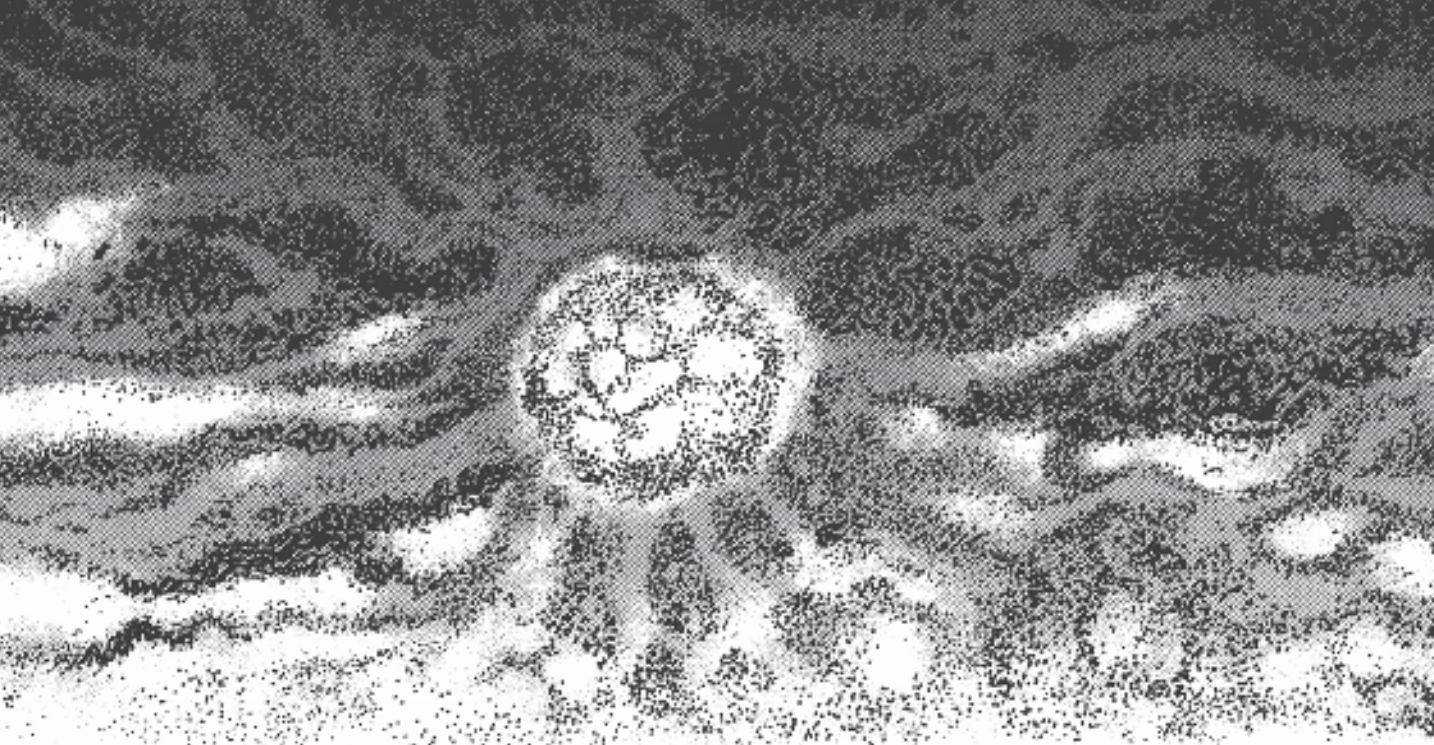






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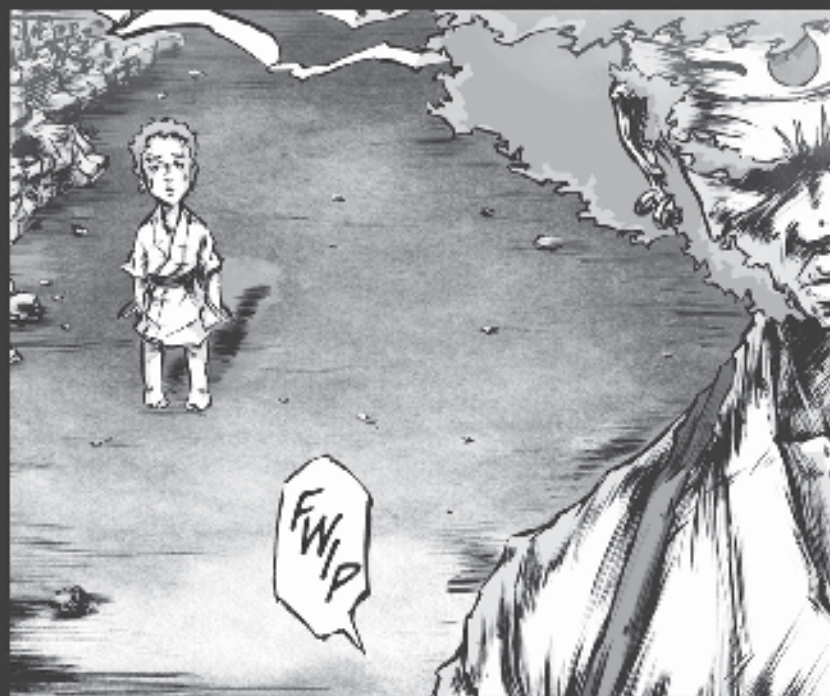
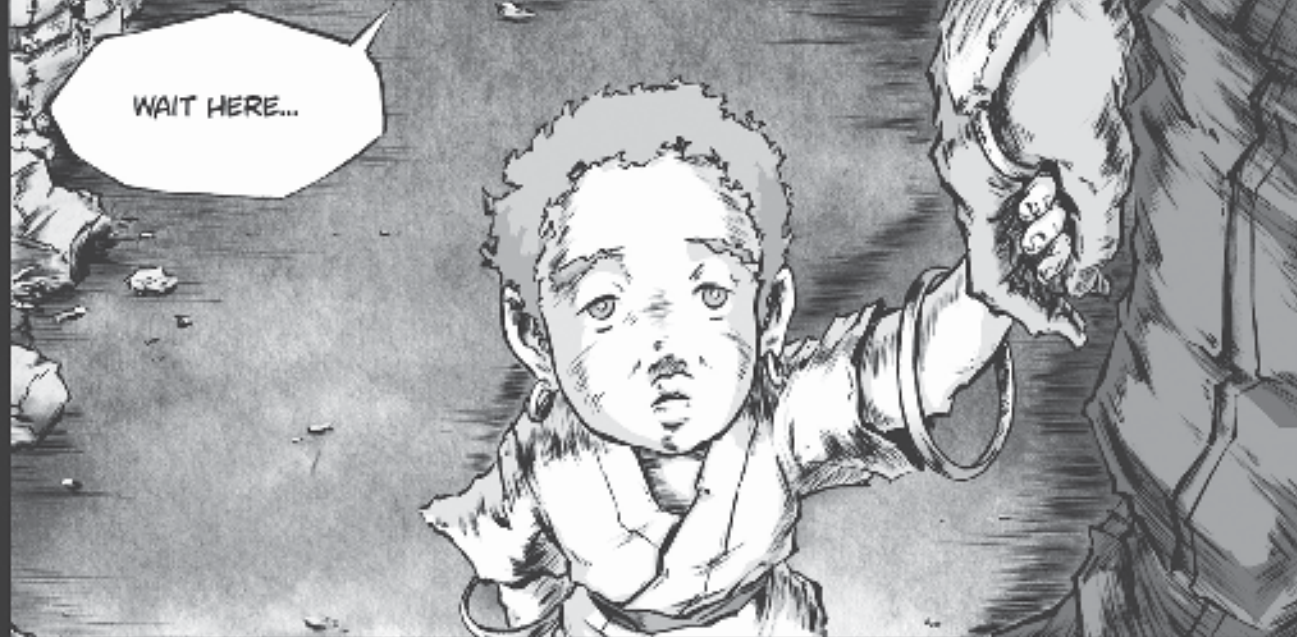
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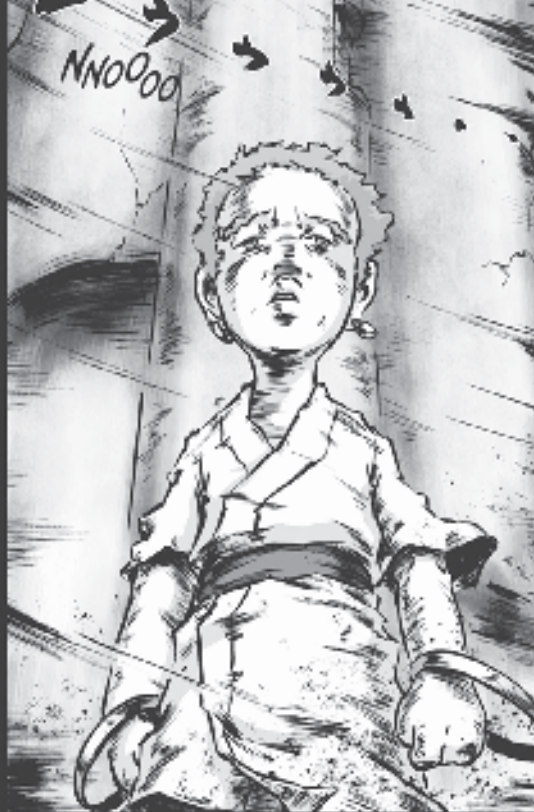




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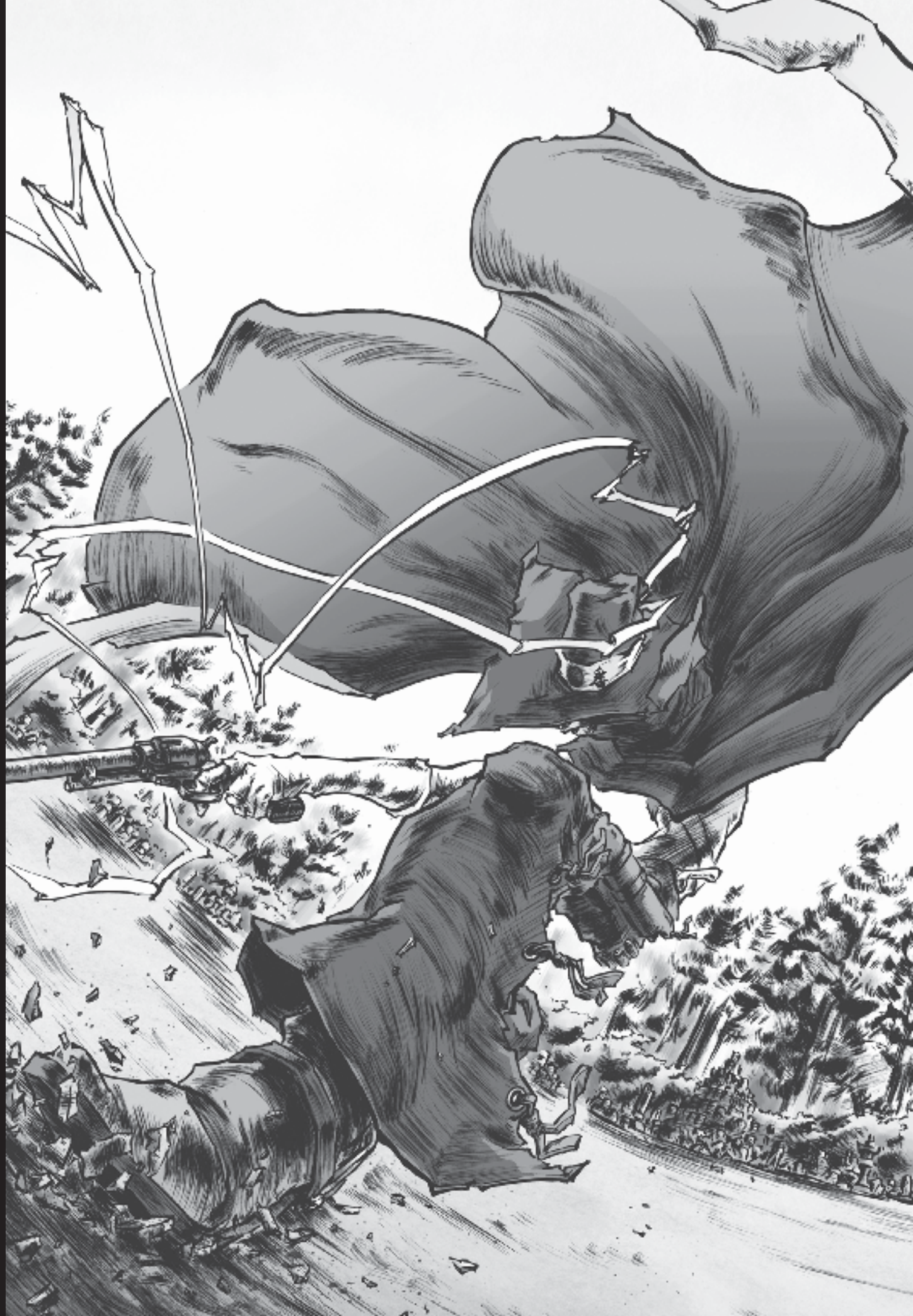




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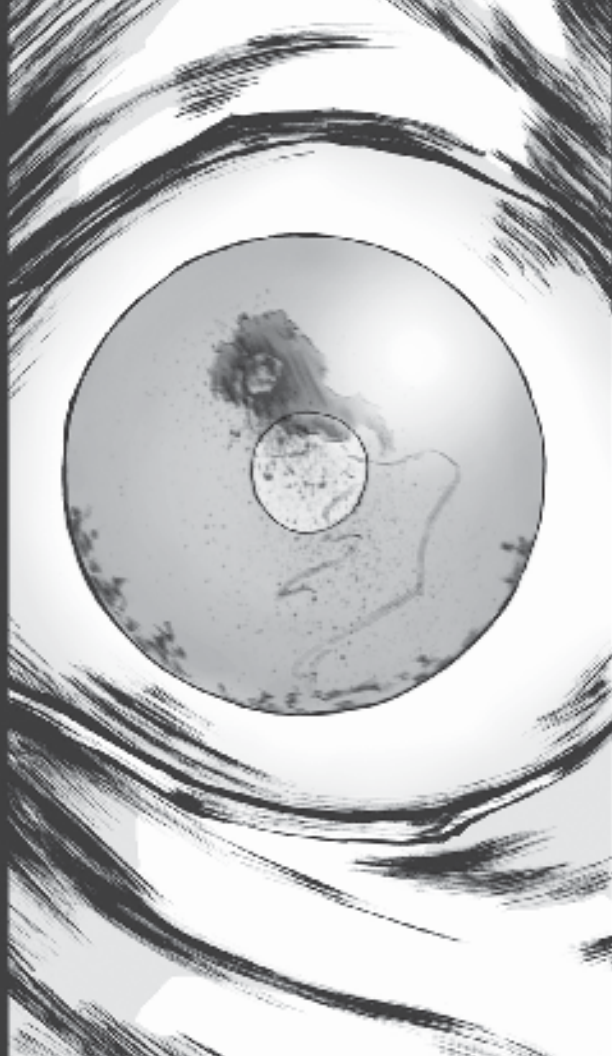
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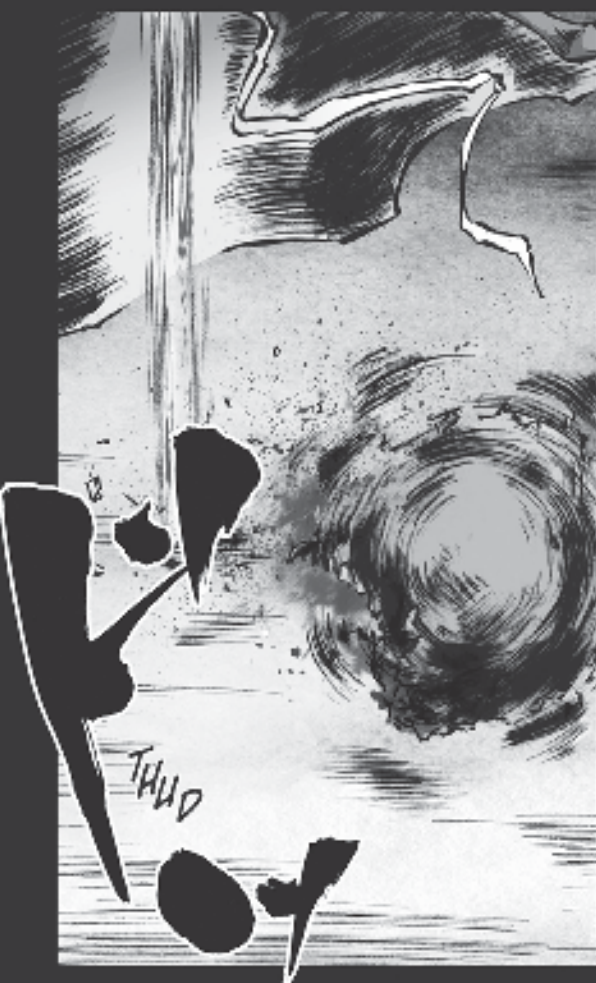
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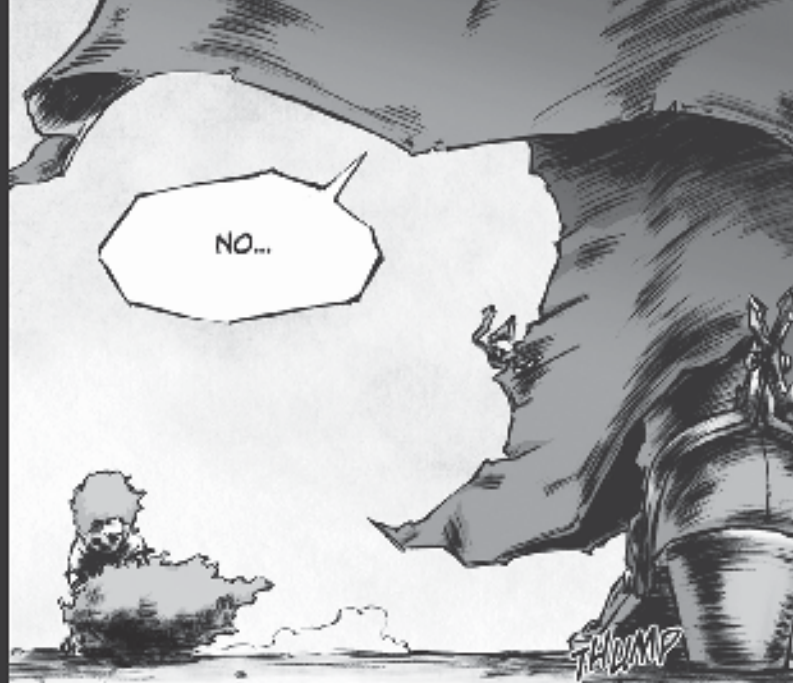




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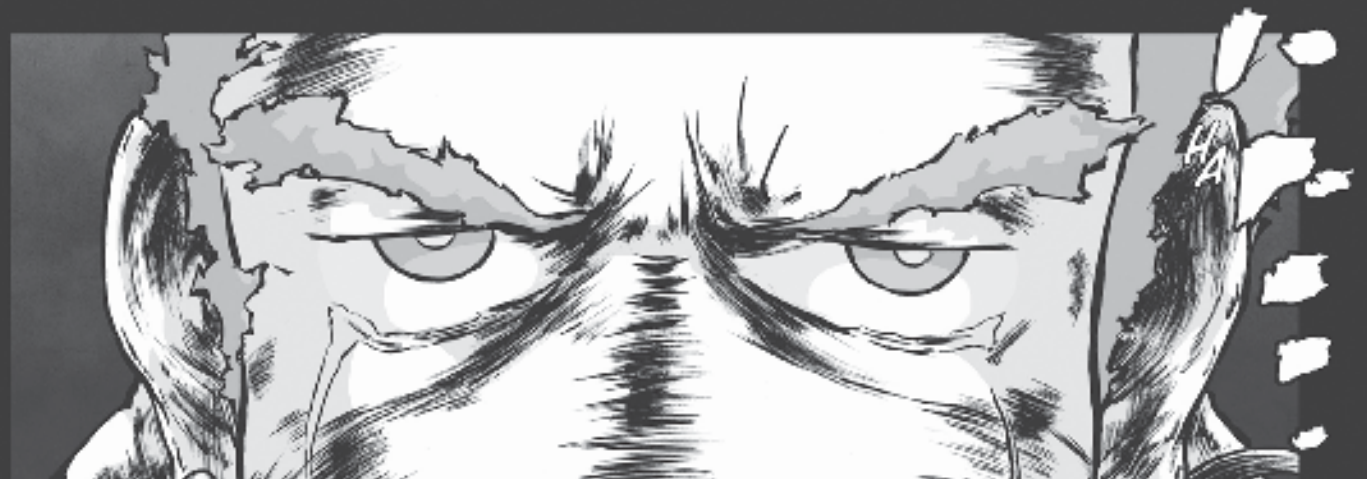
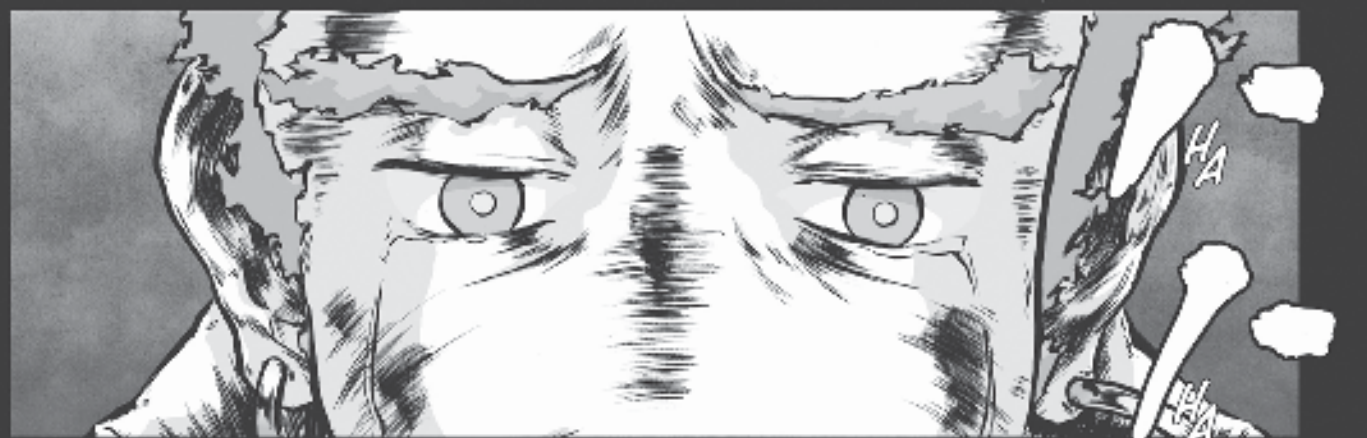
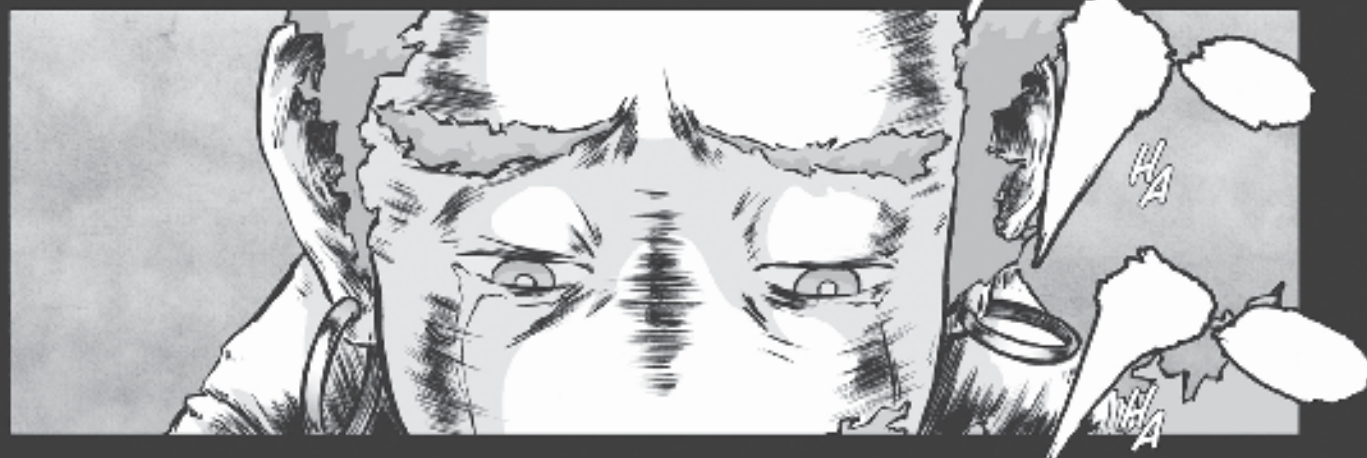
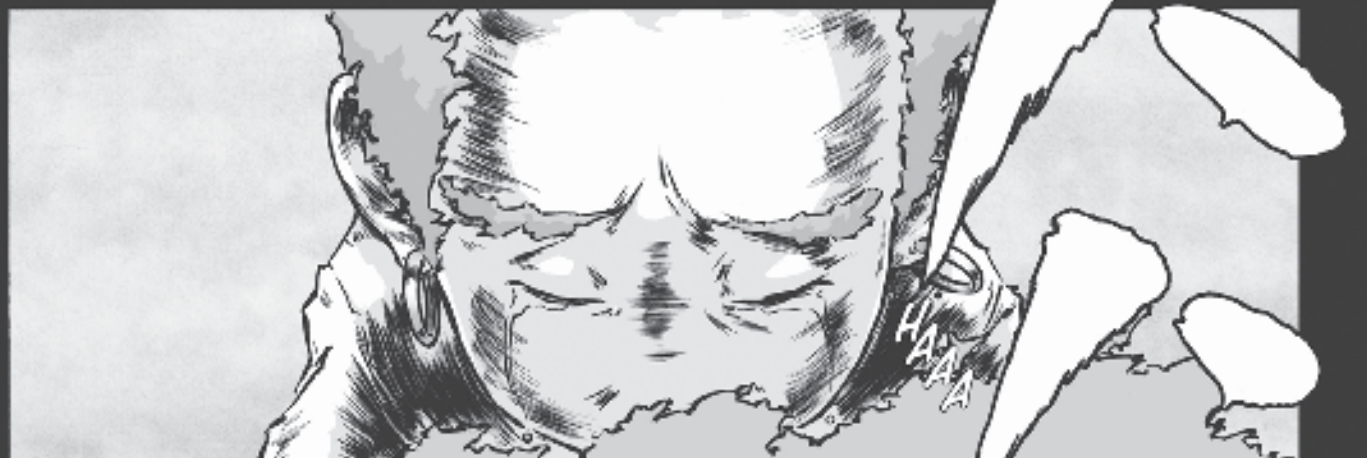
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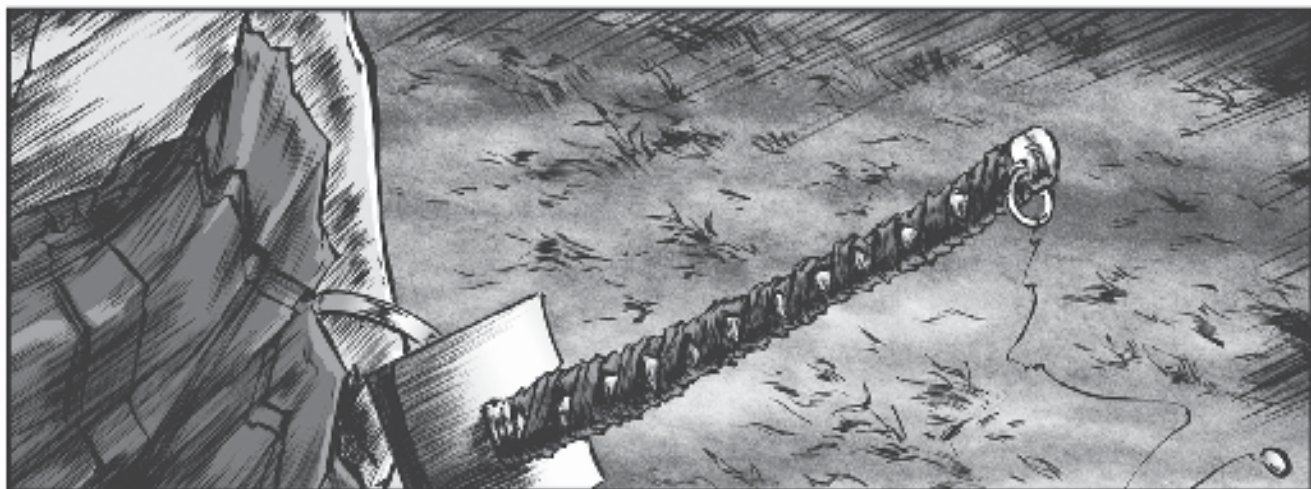




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YO, YOU WITH THE AFRO!  
KILLIN'S OUR THING, YA DIG?  
WE DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR  
LIFE. WHAT WE CARE ABOUT  
IS THE NO. 2 HEADBAND  
YOU'RE WEARING!

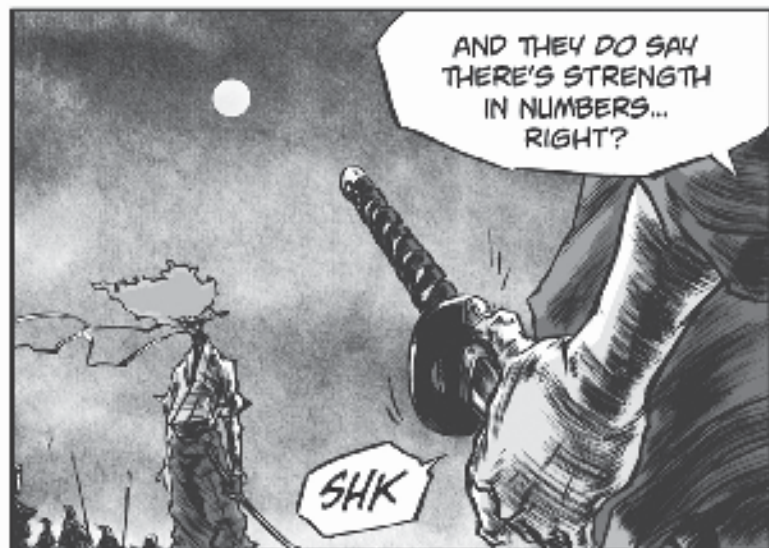
I DUNNO HOW MUCH THAT  
THING'S REALLY WORTH,  
BUT THERE'S A BIG OL'  
REWARD IN STORE!



NOW WE'RE NOT LOOKIN'  
TO KILL NO ONE WE  
DON'T HAVE TO. YOU'RE  
A KILLER, I'M SURE YOU  
UNDERSTAND



AND THEY DO SAY  
THERE'S STRENGTH  
IN NUMBERS...  
RIGHT?



SHK

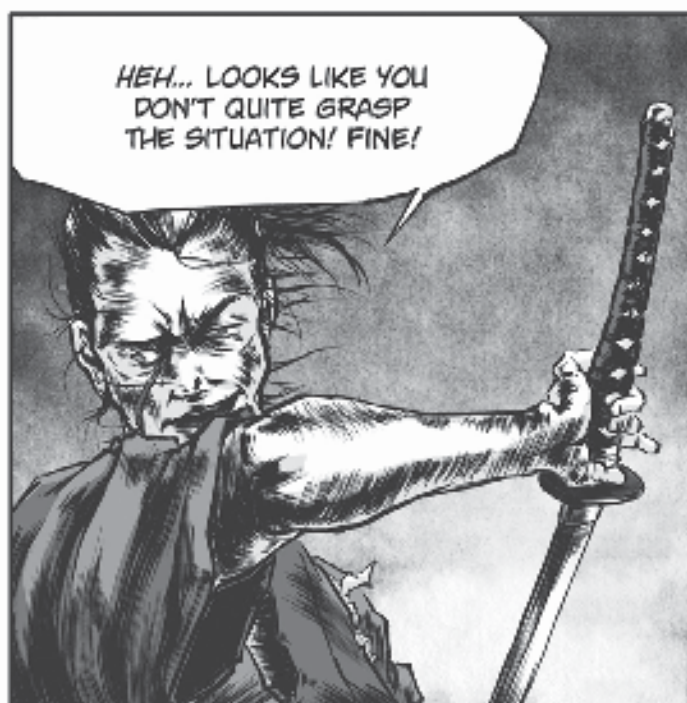
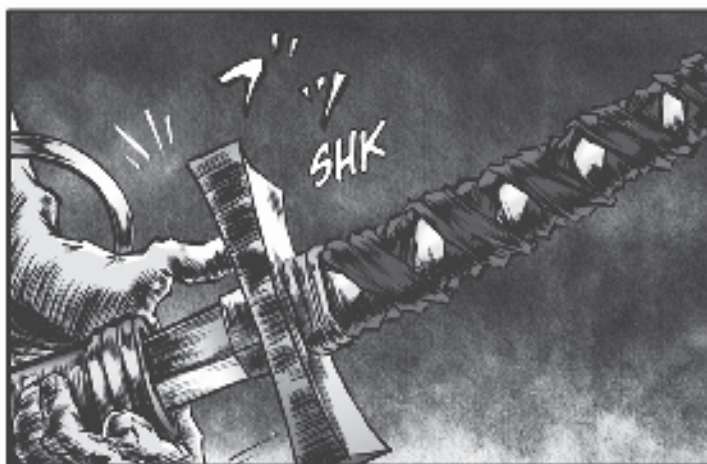
SO HOW'S ABOUT  
JUST HANDING IT  
OVER NICE AND  
EASY?





# Titan Manga - AFRO SAMURAI

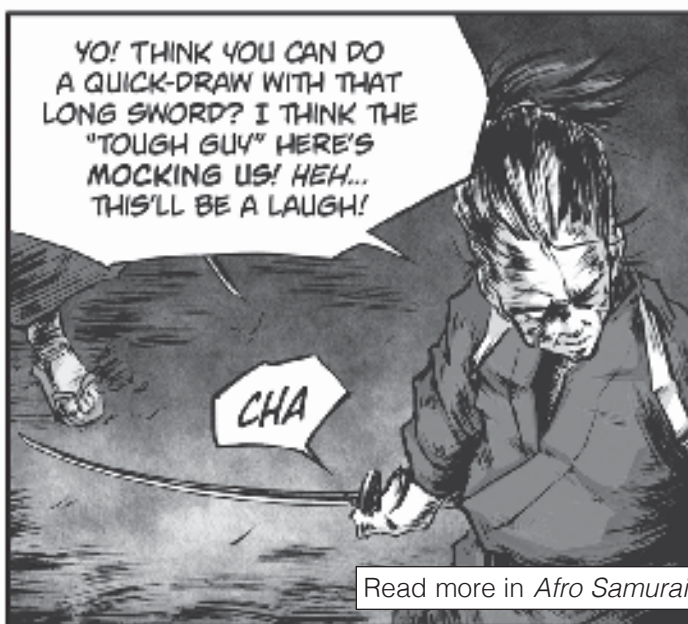
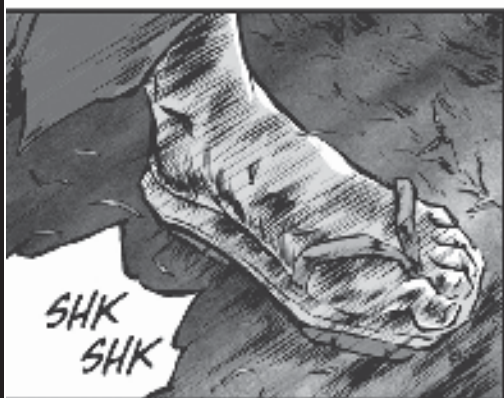
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**HERE'S HOW TO ENTER:** Just go to [www.otakuusamagazine.com](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com), click on "giveaway," and type your name, address and phone number and/or e-mail address and click on "submit." Or, if snail mail's your preference, write your name, address, phone number and/or email address on a postcard or sheet of paper and mail it to: OTAKU Giveaway (December 2022), 2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701. If your name is chosen, we'll contact you, or just send you the item!

**Rules, Rules, Rules.** The official rules are on page 94.

## Viz Media

### Castlevania, Season 1 (1 winner)

Trevor Belmont, embittered and excommunicated, finds himself drawn into a battle for the survival of Europe—a region that has brought doom upon itself by taking away the one thing its greatest monster loved.

1-Disc DVD Set, 4 Episodes, 16x9 Video, English 5.1 and 2.0 Audio, Spanish 5.1 and 2.0 Audio, English Subtitles, Spanish Subtitles.

**SPECIAL FEATURES:** Storyboards, Art Gallery and more



### Castlevania, Season 2 (1 winner)

Trevor Belmont, last survivor of his house, is no longer alone, and he and his misfit comrades, Sypha Belnades and Alucard, race to find a way to save humanity from extinction at the hands of the grief-maddened Dracula and his sinister vampire war council.

1-Disc DVD Set, 8 Episodes, 16x9 Video, English 5.1 and 2.0 Audio, Spanish 5.1 and 2.0 Audio, English

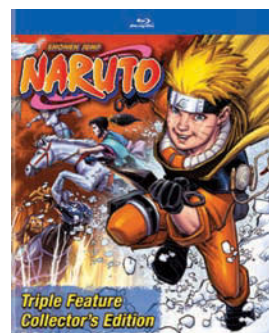
Subtitles, Spanish Subtitles

**SPECIAL FEATURES:** Production Animatics, Storyboards, Art Gallery and more

### Naruto Triple Feature Collector's Edition (1 winner)

A collector's dream! A new Blu-ray bundle of the classic Naruto movies in a deluxe cover featuring original artwork by American comic book legend, While Portacio (Uncanny X-Men, Iron Man). First young Naruto and friends guard a princess in Ninja Clash in the Land of Snow. Then it's a battle over a dangerous relic in Legend of the Stone of Gelel. And finally, Rock Lee helps with a violent uprising in Guardians of the Crescent Moon Kingdom.

**SPECIAL FEATURES:** Animated Short: Hidden Leaf Village Grand Sports Festival; Audio Commentary for: Legend of the Stone of Gelel; Audio Commentary for: Guardians of the Crescent Moon Kingdom



## Aksys Games

### Undernauts: Labyrinth of Yomi - PS5 (3 winners)

- Recover the "darkness" hidden deep within the labyrinth.
- Use the "Switch Boost" system to defeat hordes of monsters.
- Create magical doors, ladders, and bridges to escape the labyrinth



## Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd

### S.H. Figuarts: Dragonball Ultimate Gohan Super Hero (1 winner)

Son Gohan as seen in "DRAGON BALL SUPER : SUPER HERO" rejoins S.H.Figuarts! Features an all-new sculpt, plus the same new joint technology pioneered on the S.H.Figuarts Super Saiyan 4 Son Goku and Krillin: Earth's Strongest Man figures.

**Set Contents:** Main Body, Two optional expressions, Three pairs of optional hands

### S.H. Figuarts: Dragonball Piccolo Super Hero (1 winner)

Piccolo as seen in the upcoming 2022 film "DRAGON BALL SUPER : SUPER HERO" joins S.H.Figuarts, featuring design and colors as seen in the teaser trailer!

**Set Contents:** Main Body, Two optional heads, Two left and three right optional hands











# THE SHOW MUST GO ON!

*Revue Starlight* has all the lights, camera, and action to pull off a performance to rival Broadway.

**W**hen you think of musical theater, you go to the likes of *Rent*, *Aladdin*, and *Wicked*, right? Bright colors, awesome musical numbers, insane wardrobes, and a lot of sparkle: What more is there to ask for? Well, this only applies to musicals in the West. Japan, on the other hand, likes to do things a little differently. Enter the Takarazuka Revue, a musical theater troupe in which women play all of the roles (even the male-based ones!) when putting on extravagant, Broadway-style adaptations of Western works, no matter what the original medium (e.g., *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Oklahoma!*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Ocean's 11*, just to name a few), Japanese folk stories or popular culture (such as Osamu Tezuka's classic *Phoenix* manga), or even the trials and tribulations of Phoenix Wright! It's a lavish world that's earned a lot of fans over the years since its inception in 1913; its lavish aesthetic has even been the influence for a number of anime and manga works, such as *The Rose of Versailles*, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, and even Osamu Tezuka's *Princess Knight* (Fun fact: Tezuka's hometown is also the base of operations for the Takarazuka Revue).

By Michael  
Goldstein







Which brings us to *Shoujo Kageki Revue Starlight*—which aired during the 2018 summer anime season, with two movies following after—which owes a lot of its inspiration to the Takarazuka Revue. The name of the game is *Starlight*, a globally renowned theatrical play in which the role of the “Top Star” is the most desired position, and the students of Seisho Music Academy must compete against one another in order to win the grand prize, because, after all, there can only be *one* Top Star. Among the hopefuls are Karen Aijo and Hikari Kagura, childhood friends who once made a promise to perform together. But now, with nothing but their lifelong dreams and their immense dedication to play the part, they must face each other in the mysterious and surreal “Revue Starlight” audition-battles, where the most dedicated duke it out, but only the most passionate remain standing. Oh, and these auditions appear to be moderated by a talking giraffe. Also, the giraffe has the voice of Seto Kaiba (Kenjiro Tsuda). I wish I knew how to make that up.

That last tidbit may sound ridiculous (and to be frank, it *is*), but in all fairness, a lot of *Revue Starlight*’s arresting direction can be traced back to Kunihiko Ikuhara—who previously created such famous anime as *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, *Mawaru Penguindrum*, and *Yuri Kuma Arashi*—whose collaboration with director Tomohiro Furukawa has produced not only this

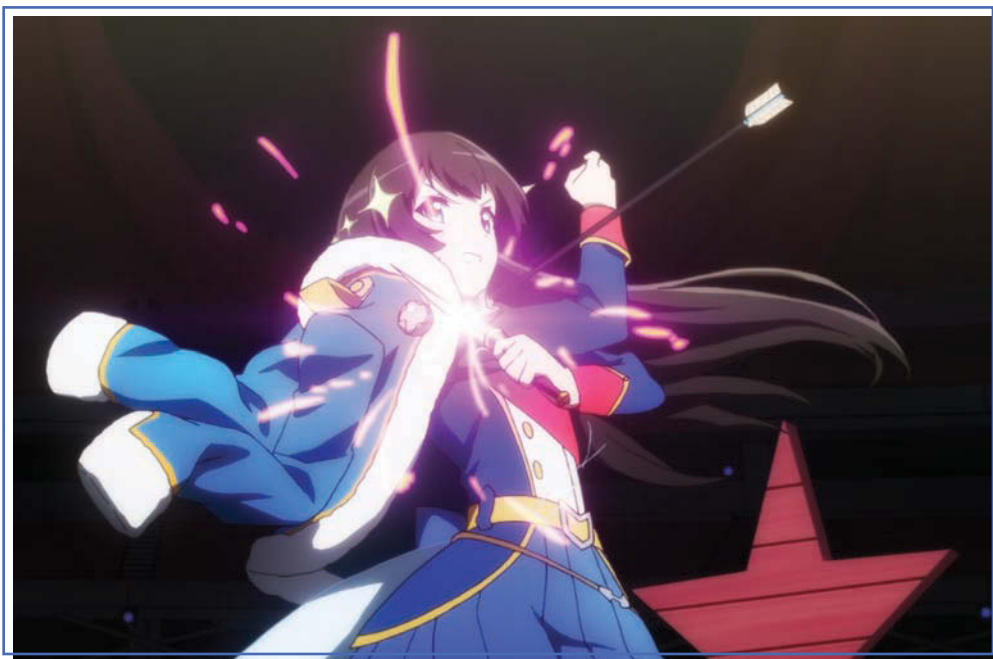
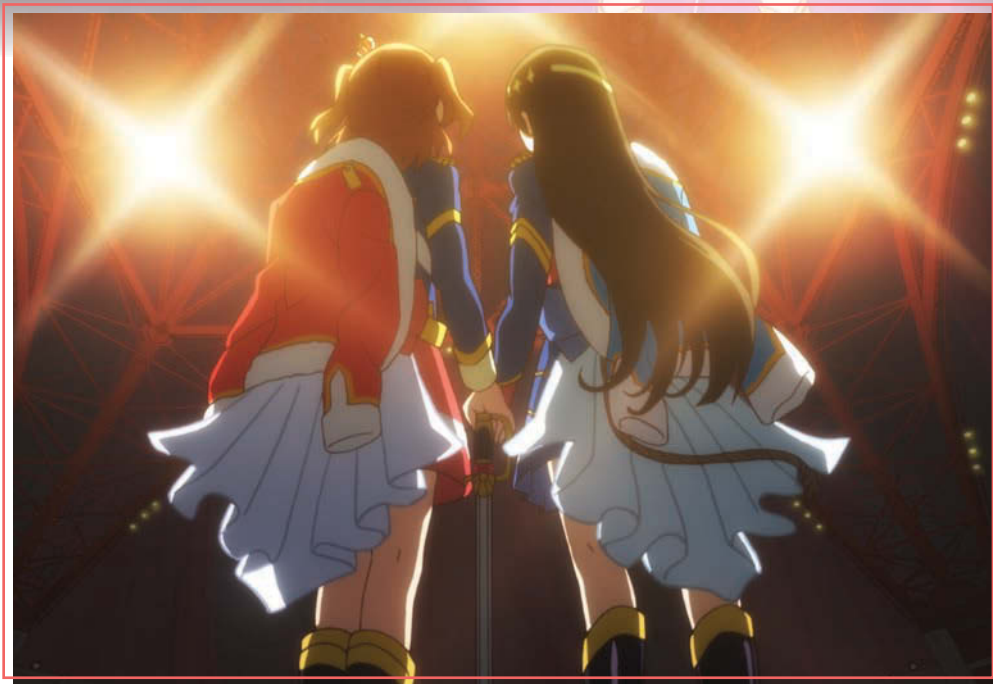
**With a combination of hidden symbolism, gorgeously detailed duels, and a cast of endearing characters, *Revue Starlight* knows how to hold your attention from the minute the curtains rise to the moment they finally fall.**



© Project Revue Starlight.







mysterious giraffe, but also the surreal yet gorgeous layouts that inhabit the show (not to mention one of the most surreal magical-girl-esque transformation sequences I've seen in a while). Each display is an immensely colorful feast of organized chaos for the eyes and a treasure trove of hidden meanings waiting to be discovered and unpacked. And I'm not going to reveal where the giraffe fits in all of this, because quite frankly, the reveal itself is quite amazing; you'll have to see it for yourself.

At face value, *Revue Starlight* looks like an idol-style show, what with the girls training as hard as possible in between auditions to become the best they can be onstage. But *Revue Starlight* doesn't have the save-the-school storyline that the *Love Live!* franchise or the absurdist undead comedic timing of *Zombie Land Saga*. That's because *Revue Starlight* is not about IDOLS in the first place; it's about THEATER. There are no brightly colored concerts for miles around; in *Revue Starlight*, the girls literally duel one another—swords, singing, the works!—to see who has got what it takes to claim the lead role so wanted by all those who aspire to reach it. But though every duel has some amazing choreography, it's not just about the insane swordplay; each clash is really about showcasing the unique anxieties and fears that plague the aspiring performers. They're not just fighting each other; they're all fighting a single entity that comes in many different forms. Every envy, insecurity, jealousy, and ambition is translated perfectly in the form of constantly shifting props and excellently flamboyant choreography. It's all a stunning display of fantasy and realism that does well to display what we all tend to feel from time to time. Helping out is the superb animation by Kinema Citrus, who manage to blow every out of the water with polished character designs and inter-layered backgrounds and fight scenes.

And true to its theme of competition, *Revue Starlight* is not so much a singular, 12-episode-long story going straight from point A to point B,



but rather a collection of perspectives (kind of like a slice-of-life anime, but at the same time, *not really*): every episode centers on a specific student going through the intense training needed to be a stage actress, especially when your closest friends are your toughest competition when striving to be the best like no one ever was. Each episode does a great job at propping up the various, unique anxieties and fears each character possesses, as well as their own unique drives to be the Top Star.

In fact, I think it's safe to say, from the very beginning, *Revue Starlight* has something to say about the very premise of the "Top Star" and the difficulties that come with theater career as a whole: there really is no such thing as a "Top Star," as the theater has always been a collaborative effort no matter which way the trapeze swings. Being the "Top Star" means being all on your own, something that the theater industry has never been about. To disregard it as such is to sin against the very notion of theater itself. While I don't have the proper qualifications to unpack just how well *Revue Starlight* communicates its critiques, I will say that where it leads to is totally worth the wait.

They say that all the world's a stage, and *Revue Starlight* takes this notion and runs with it from beginning to end. With a combination of hidden symbolism, gorgeously detailed duels, and a cast of endearing characters, the show knows how to hold your attention from the minute the curtains rise to the moment they finally fall. Even though it may be a universal preference, this anime is bound to resonate with anyone with a passion for musical theater, be he or she either human or giraffe.

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***Revue Starlight* is available from  
Sentai Filmworks.**



© Project Revue Starlight







# **HIGH** **ADVENTURE!**

An old-school  
anime action  
icon returns  
in *Spriggan*.





**I'M** convinced that the decision-making mechanism by which Netflix decides to greenlight original anime productions is "key executive remembers an anime they rented from an American video store in the 90s/00s and decides they ought to bring that back." It's a sound strategy, as many anime of that era adapted short snippets from much longer-running manga rather than elect for a more comprehensive approach. Made up in my head though it may be, I can think of no other reason Netflix would, in the year 2022, re-introduce an unsuspecting populace to the 1989 Shonen Sunday action classic, *Spriggan*, in glorious fashion. As *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* taught us, the trick is to use David Production as the animation studio!

The myths and ancient religions weren't just fables or fiction. Whether the Mahabharata or the Old Testament, each served as records of an ancient ultra-advanced civilization far more powerful than modern humanity can imagine. Relics of that civilization remain strewn throughout the globe, and any one of these legend-inspiring OOParts ("Out of Place Artifacts") harbors such immense potential destructive power that their safe recovery or disposal is paramount for humanity's continued existence. Such is the mission of the multinational corporation ARCAM, which harnesses the lost technology to foster the creation of covert private militia super-soldiers known as "Spriggan," so named after the mythological spirits that inhabit ancient ruins. But national militaries of the world, along with rival corporations sporting their own powered operatives are also waging that same arms race with ARCAM, such that the discovery of OOParts invariably results in a clandestine battle for control. These are the adventures

By Daryl Surat



of Yu Ominae, the Spriggan agent of ARCAM's "Japanese branch" whose secret identity is that he's a teenage delinquent attendee of what I refer to as "Anime High School"!

Aside from being a deadly child soldier, Yu is equipped with melee weapons and armor made of the mythical metal orichalcum, which effectively makes him bulletproof while also granting him superhuman speed and strength on top of his elite military training. Oddly enough, Yu's semiautomatic pistol that he brandishes with his trademark angled

grip appears to just be an ordinary, albeit very nice, pistol. He'll need all that gear, since every episode features a different highly capable powerful rival, plus a supporting cast member for Yu to banter with. If you ever wanted a series where the American military is never depicted in a positive light (or the Russians, or Germans, or most of the British, or...), then *Spriggan* is where it's at! My favorite is Jean Jacquemonde: the shotgun-wielding French Spriggan with super-speed. Jean's only appearance thus far is in episode 2 which formed the basis of the old the-

atrical *Spriggan* animated movie from the late 1990s (see sidebar), but there he didn't use his OTHER key ability which is showcased here in full glory. What was originally a few brief manga panels is now a full sequence. Clearly David Production knew I'd been waiting decades for it. (Spoilers: he's Chopper Dave.)

Although "ONA" (Original Net Animation) is the modern term of choice for describing these streaming-exclusive anime titles, most feel like high-quality television episodes with more leeway granted towards graphic violence or the like. But *Spriggan* feels different, as each of the (initial?) six 45-minute-long episodes of *Spriggan* is effectively a self-contained story centering around the ultra-violent exploits pertaining to a different potentially sacrilegious McGuffin. The spirit of the OVAs of my youth lives on here, particularly when it comes to the violence. The understatement of the year is that *Spriggan* contains massive levels of bloody violence and splatter-heavy dismemberment—but gore alone doesn't make anime great. Critical is the fact that everything remains visually coherent; the camera framing is always clear, and shots are edited so it's always evident where characters are, relative to one another. The fast, frantic action choreography is top rate for gun-

play and vehicles, as well as hand to hand. Pay special attention during the fights to how much consideration is afforded to character spacing, footwork, and the surrounding environment, since you've no doubt seen your share of incomprehensible superhero action fights in mainstream television and cinema. Netflix first announced *Spriggan* all the way back in 2019, and with the amount of time and effort this level of care and attention to detail warrants, the wait was worth it.

There is one crack in Yu's Armored Muscle Suit, though. As with Netflix's *Baki*, the animation does conspicuously shift from 2D to 3D CG when handling the more complicated action sequences, which for *Spriggan* is nearly all of them. I'm certainly a vocal critic of 3D CG in Japanese animation, and while the blending between the 2D and 3D characters/environments is commendable, it's not perfect. Still, I'll gladly take this approach to 3D CG anime over what Polygon Pictures and Sola Digital Arts do. If a day ever comes when anime productions achieve the level of making 3D CG animation look like 2D the way that say, modern "2.5D" fighting games by Arc System Works do (*Guilty Gear*, *Granblue Versus*, *DNF Duel*), it'll be studios like David Production that pull it off.

*Spriggan* episodes generally conform to the original manga by writer Hiroshi Takashige and



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artist Ryouji Minagawa, albeit modernized from their 1989 roots to take place in our present day of smartphones and tablet PCs rather than the end of the Cold War. Still, there's some reshuffling of events, and others are condensed or (for now) omitted entirely so you'll have to read the manga if you wish to see the clones of Hitler in action. Fortunately, in the wake of this Netflix anime series Seven Seas Entertainment is releasing a deluxe unflipped edition of the original manga in all its 1980s glory! Yep, soon there'll be no need to hold onto those old flipped U.S. releases from the 1990s that Viz released to minimal fanfare under the name "Striker."

Should *Spriggan* catch on, there remains plenty of manga story arcs to adapt for further seasons. I've no idea when David Production would be able to find time for making them, since they've still got *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean* to continue, not to mention the upcoming highly anticipated reboot of *Urusei Yatsura*. But, like the plates to mankind frozen outside of time, I'll be waiting.

*Spriggan* is available from Netflix.



## NOAH WILL BE YOUR GRAVE

Despite currently being out of print and unavailable for streaming in the U.S., the 1998 *Spriggan* film just might be one of the most overhyped anime films in America of all time. Animated by Studio 4C, what is primarily an adaptation of the "Noah's Ark" story told in the second episode of the Netflix series eschewed much of the character interplay of the source material to instead focus on some absolutely spectacular cel-animated action sequences across the globe. It's a hugely entertaining action spectacle—for the first 30 minutes. Then it grinds to a screeching halt with typical anime villainy speeches for an hour.

*Spriggan: The Movie* was intended to be headed up by Katsuhiro Otomo of *Akira* fame, but after extensive delays—in an Otomo project? I'm shocked!—was completed by others. This did not prevent U.S. distributor ADV Films from heavily promoting *Spriggan* as "the next *Akira*!" in a bid for mainstream success; an absolute curse of death, as nothing can ever be that. So confident it would be their biggest hit ever, ADV debuted *Spriggan: The Movie* in theaters across several major cities in the U.S., hoping to match the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in that brief post-*Matrix* yet pre-*Matrix Reloaded* era where Asian pop culture was cool. Unfortunately, ADV released *Spriggan* in October 2001: one month after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Nobody then was interested in this cartoon featuring suicide bombers, child soldiers, the American military as the antagonists, and creative interpretations of the Old Testament.



*Ya Boy Kongming!* is an anime that crosses time and space to take a satirical look at modern Japan.

# BLAST

By  
Michael  
Goldstein

FROM THE

# PAST



**AS** Stevie Wonder once sang, “Music is a world within itself with a language we all understand.” And he’s not the only one who thinks so. Enter Three Kingdoms-era strategist Zhuge Liang (Kongming, for short). When he finally meets his end in the Battle of Wuzhang Plains, on his deathbed, he wishes that his next life is a peaceful one, one free of bloodshed. As a result, he is reborn in modern-day Japan as a younger version of himself. He takes to the present day pretty darn quick, but now he wishes to seek out a new “master” to serve his purpose of creating a more peaceful world. Does he go straight to the Japanese Diet? Does he search for an up-and-coming politician in need of a new message? Nope! It’s fledgling singer Eiko Tsukimi, whose voice inspires Kongming to become her manager and help her conquer the music world, believing it may be the key to achieving peace in the country, because he likes her music a lot.

Did any of that sound completely bonkers to you? On one hand, *Ya Boy Kongming!*, which aired during the spring 2022 anime season, certainly caused a lot of people to raise their eyebrows. On the other hand, is this *really* the most bonkers anime premise you’ve ever heard? Reverse isekai aren’t really new; they’re just rare (keep in mind, as I’m writing this, the long-awaited sequel to *The Devil Is a Part-Timer!!* just started airing). And the ones that are already out there haven’t exactly peaked in the pop culture hemisphere. The thing about *Kongming!* is, from the word “go,” it dives into its premise and doesn’t let up. The show is this strange, but somehow natural, blend of historical fiction and commentary (particularly on social media culture). It’s one of those show that *shouldn’t* work, but somehow *does*, despite the star’s old-school charisma.

Part of that success comes from the titular man himself. True to his history, Kongming is a gifted tactician who manages to use the same strategies he learned ages ago to manipulate

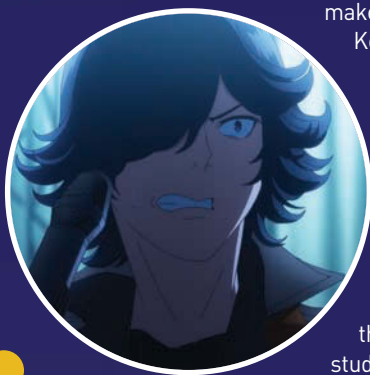








**YA BOY KONGMING!** DIVES INTO ITS PREMISE AND DOESN'T LET UP. THE SHOW IS A STRANGE, BUT SOMEHOW NATURAL, BLEND OF HISTORICAL FICTION AND COMMENTARY.



the flow of “battle” and come out on top even when back into a corner. At first, the synopsis makes things look like the show will be about Kongming floundering in a flood of new information and technology like all the “fish out of water” stories before it. But, true to his history, he adapts himself pretty darn swimmingly to his new territory.

If the man were some I-know-more-than-you super-genius, he may not have the same level of swagger and believability we’re already seeing. But he manages to avoid a lot of the pitfalls that comes with the archetype: simply put, he’s a dedicated study and a Renaissance man. If he can party hearty, it’s because he learned all the ins and outs of not being tardy for the party in the modern day. Not only that, he’s also clearly applying the tools of his past life. It’s one thing to watch a character if their main schtick is just being perfect and good at everything they do—especially if they’re a major historical figure—but other nuances come into play to make the

Kongming character, and to a greater extent the anime, a much stronger.

Case in point, his friendship with Eiko, who manages much of the heavy lifting as well. Her background is much more down to earth: once suffering from terrible depression, Eiko came close to ending it all until a chance encounter with her current boss led to her going to a concert and being inspired by the performance enough to take on singing herself. Now she’s out to give people the same kind of inspiration she received. She’s got the vocals for it, that’s for sure, but all she’s really doing now is shouting into the void. That’s where Kongming comes in.

One thing I find interesting to point out here is that Eiko is not aiming to be an idol here, especially not a school idol; she’s aiming to be a singer. I think that contrast alone is refreshing, and this show does a good job demonstrating just how different the two career paths are, even though idols have nothing to do with the plot or have any presence in the show to begin with. We’re so used to the constant bombardment of

## HISTORY LESSON

You don’t need to be a Three Kingdoms expert to get into *Ya Boy Kongming!*, but a little background knowledge certainly wouldn’t hurt. The name refers to a sixty-year period in which China was divided into three kingdoms—Wei, Shu, and Wu—at the end of the Han Dynasty (the name itself is something of a misnomer, as there was no actual king at the time). The period ended with unification under the Western Jin Dynasty. This was the era that saw the highest body count in Chinese history, with a nationwide census at the time showing around 40 million people having lost their lives. Although it was a relatively short era, that didn’t stop future generations from romanticizing and giving it a space in operas, folk stories, and novels, most of famous of which is Luo Guanzhong’s historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

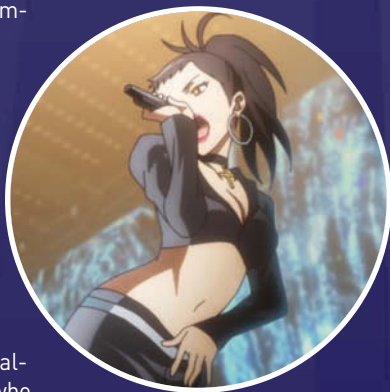


idol anime where it's all gumballs and rainbows, it's nice to have a show that shows you the hard truth: it takes a lot more than creativity to make it in showbiz.

Most of the focus is really on Eiko, which is another refreshing change from the fish-out-of-water template, which makes sense, if you think about it. Kongming already takes to the new era rather gracefully, so there really is nothing to extract comedy from. What makes their friendship something special is that he legitimately believes in her, which may have something to do with his historic loyalty, something that has been well documented, as Liu Bei would easily attest. And even on days where it looks like Kongming has vanished into thin air, he's really out doing reconnaissance, building connections, and amassing resources. The world really could use more role models like that—those who keep moving to help their friends no matter what.

*Ya Boy Kongming!* doesn't have a save-the-school storyline or the bright colors of the *Love Live!* franchise or any absurdist undead comedic timing like *Zombie Land Saga*. Most likely because those are idol shows, which *Ya Boy Kongming!* is clearly not. What the 12-episode anime does do, however, is combine a nonsensical premise with a distinguishable sense of style. What ultimately makes this show work, apart from its meme-esque pitch, is its commitment to a serious exploration of its own story's musical side, and it becomes a sincere reflection of the relationship of performers and those they perform for. Eiko and Kongming clearly still have a long way to go, but given what we've seen so far, I have no doubt this show will have trouble reaching beyond its rare concept.

***Ya Boy Kongming!* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**





# all together now

By  
Brittany  
Vincent

*Yuki Yuna is a Hero* is an anime that turns everything you know about magical girls upside down.

The students of the Sanshu Middle School Hero Club want nothing more than to make the world a better place. From finding lost kittens and returning them to their owners to putting on puppet shows, there's nothing they won't do to help their community. Members Yuna Yuki, Mimori Togo, Fu Inubozaki, Itsuki Inubozaki, and the rest of the girls who eventually join are dedicated to making a difference.

At least, that's what the Hero Club is all about on the surface. In *Yuki Yuna is a Hero*, things aren't always what they seem. And as the girls slowly begin to learn the truth behind the Hero Club and everything it stands for, the world as they know it is turned upside down. Welcome to the world of magical girls, deconstruction-style.

## Summoned to Fight

*Yuki Yuna is a Hero* follows a group of girls who aren't just members of the Sanshu Middle School Hero Club, but best friends, too. One fateful day, while working on a special mission to return lost kittens to their owners, the Hero Club's Fu must reveal an important secret to the rest of the group: the real reason the Hero Club was formed in the first place.

In the middle of class, all of the girls receive a strange message warning of "forestization" on their phones. In addition, time has suddenly come to an end. The Hero Club members are enveloped in a shining, rainbow-hued light, and are transported to a colorful forest they've never seen before. And Fu has an explanation. She hasn't really been forthright with her new friends, and now's the time to













let them know what's really going on. She's a magical girl, and she's been chosen by Shinju, the Divine Tree, to defeat enemies known as Vertex. Should the enemies achieve their goal of destroying Shinju, the world will come to an end.

Fu initially used the Hero Club as a guide to recruit members to fight alongside her, including Yuna — and when it comes time to fight, the Hero Club, including Yuna and Mimori, has to bring to battle to the Vertex. Yuna is the first girl to truly awaken beyond Fu and her sister Itsuki, and transforms into a new form with abundant strength and abilities to knock the Vertex back. It looks like things are going to be a lot different from now on, especially since the Hero Club is now literally a group of heroes charged with saving a world they knew nothing about just days prior.

### All Together Heroes

The girls now charged with becoming heroes have to work hard and sacrifice to help save the Shinju and defeat the Vertex enemies that come their way. Each approaches their newest task with a different kind of attitude, starting with Yuna. Ever the optimistic young woman, she loves being able to help others. She's kind, patient, and loving. And she'd do just about anything to help those who are important to her. When she's transformed and ready to fight, she uses her armored fists to make short work of enemies.

Togo Mimori is Yuna's best friend and classmate. She's quiet and kind, and uses a wheelchair to get around after losing many of her memories and the use of her legs in a car accident. She fights with guns and long-range weapons, and she has plenty of technical prowess.

Fu Inubozaki is the president of the Hero Club, and Itsuki's older sister. She's strong and fierce, and a great leader. She initially found out about the Shinju and the Vertex and supplied those she

**yuki yuna is a hero**  
is a series that combines everything you love about magical girl shows: flashy transformations, endearing characters, dazzling fights, and even a bit of darkness thrown in for good measure.

### yuki yuna is a multimedia hero »»

There's more to the Hero Club girls' exploits than a single anime series. If you're interested in seeing where things go with the Vertex and the magical girls tasked with defeating them, there's plenty more of Yuna and her friends' adventures to take part in.

You can start with several anime series, including the original 12-episode run, and then a three-part film series based on the show's second season that you can watch—or get into the second season, which is comprised of six episodes. There are three short films based on the show's spin-off manga, and an additional short anime based on the Yuki Yuna smartphone game. And finally, there's a third season called *The Great Mankai Chapter*.

Beyond that, there are multiple games, including two visual novels for Windows, and an action game for the PS Vita. You can also follow along with the manga, of course, which spans multiple volumes and chapters, in addition to four light novels to take in. The expanded Yuki Yuna universe is quite a large one, encroaching on Madoka-like territory, so you don't have to say goodbye to this strange world of magical girls just because the first season comes to a close.



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anyone can  
be a hero,  
and anyone can  
overcome  
adversity to  
ensure the best  
for others.

recruited with the app required to summon the strength to fight the Vertex. She uses a massive sword when in her hero form to eliminate threats.

Itsuki Inubozaki is Fu's younger sister. She's quiet and a bit timid, and looks up to her sister for guidance. She uses vines to attack enemies when in her hero form, and she's always there for anyone who needs her, even if she doesn't always have the confidence she needs in herself.

There are other girls who end up joining the fight, such as Karin Miyoshi and Sonoko Nogi, but the Hero Club's initial recruits are some of the most important parts of the entire saga—and you'll get to know the rest as the series goes on.

### In Full Bloom

Though many magical girls can fight using the power of love, friendship, and justice—or a number of special relics—the heroes of *Yuki Yuna is a Hero* use a special app Fu urged them to install on their phones to change into their more powerful forms.

Imbued with innate strength and abilities given to them by the Shinju and Taisha people, they all have unique outfits and weapons with which they can destroy the Vertex. After each of the girls completes a transformation sequence, they're ready to save the day with everything from bare fists to elegant lances that pierce through enemies.

Each and every girl has a special ability they bring to the table, but they all have an important "Mankai" form to remember as well. Think of it as going "Super Saiyan" à la *Dragon Ball Z*. It's a massively powerful form that can imbue each girl with enough magical ability to completely blow away Vertex enemies.

But, as is usually the case with this type of ability, it's only available for a limited time, and it does come with a price. That's something you'll need to discover for yourself as you make your way through *Yuki Yuna is a Hero*, but you may not be prepared to learn the truth.

### Anyone Can Be a Hero

*Yuki Yuna is a Hero* is a series that combines everything you love about magical girl shows: flashy transformations, endearing characters, dazzling fights, and even a bit of darkness thrown in for good measure. In the end, though, its most important message is this: anyone can be a hero, and anyone can overcome adversity to ensure the best for others.

If you're looking for a unique and underrated series that still hasn't quite received its fair due, give *Yuki Yuna is a Hero* a try. Just don't be surprised if you end up needing a lot more tissues than you may originally have planned for.

***Yuki Yuna is a Hero* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**











## Mighty Godzilla Hammer

Kaiju cartoons, body horror, and a giant ape

### Godzilla (1978 TV Series)

I was born with a Godzilla-shaped hole in my soul, and the only way to fill it is to watch every Godzilla-related thing that I encounter. I've seen every Godzilla film, both Toho and Legendary. Even the bad ones. Especially the bad ones. And yet,

and Boomerang, *Godzilla* never saw a proper home video release aside from a few DVDs containing the first season that were published in 2006–2007. The second season was never released on home video. So when Toho's GODZILLA OFFICIAL YouTube channel began streaming this relic of a long-forgotten time, I embraced the chaos. At last, I could consume this terrible cartoon.

Make no mistake, the 1978 *Godzilla* cartoon is terrible. The animation is sloppy and riddled with errors (coloring mistakes, mis-layered cells, missing backgrounds)

despite there being nearly seven decades of giant monster shenanigans since the Big G's debut in 1954, the Godzilla-shaped hole remains.

I had never seen the 1978 Hanna-Barbera *Godzilla* cartoon before, and for good reason: on one hand, I'd heard it was terrible, and on the other, the series was largely unavailable. Despite once being in heavy rotation on Cartoon Network

and with short-cuts such as re-used run cycles and solid-black silhouettes to cheap out on actual artwork. One egregious example is the constant release of the vertical or horizontal hold on an otherwise immobile image to simulate the illusion of titanic, earth-shaking action. From a story standpoint, every episode is identical: the crew of the scientific research vessel

*Calico* explore an exotic locale; they discover a monster; they summon Godzilla; Godzilla fights and defeats the monster, thus restoring equilibrium; as the episode concludes, Godzooky plays the fool to make the kiddies laugh. It's the same cookie-cutter pattern for two seasons straight, 26 episodes of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

And yet... And yet, as I watched Toho's terrible transfer of this terrible cartoon (with each episode chopped into three unequal pieces and uploaded in gloriously pixelated 480p), the Godzilla-shaped hole began to fill. Sure, the animation is pure hackery, the stories are boiler-plate, and Godzooky is the most tedious children's mascot character this side of Scrappy-Doo, but despite all its countless flaws, the 1978 Hanna-Barbera *Godzilla* cartoon has a certain perverse appeal. The voice acting—directed by the late, great Wally Burr and featuring Ted Cassidy (Lurch from the original *The Addams Family* TV series) as the titular fire-breathing dinosaur—is shockingly good. Even though the giant monster violence is laughably tame in order to conform to the standards & practices of late Seventies kiddy cartoons, the designs of the monsters of the



DISTRIBUTOR  
Toho via YouTube

ORIGINALLY  
RELEASED  
1978

RUNNING TIME  
30 minutes per  
episode

week are bizarre and compelling. With its mixture of high-concept weirdness and lowbrow children's antics, my brain drew comparisons between *Godzilla* and *Ultra Q*, and to my shock and chagrin, the comparisons were positive ones.

At the time of this writing, the GODZILLA OFFICIAL by TOHO YouTube channel is uploading the



second season of *Godzilla*. When these words see print, most of the series will be available for anyone with an Internet connection to experience and—dare I say it?—enjoy. An artifact from a time before the broadcast reforms of the Eighties turned every cartoon I grew up with into a 22-minute toy commercial, *Godzilla* is a conundrum: a toy-etic concoction with no accompanying toys. A

bastard of broadcasting that was kicked around from TV block to TV block, paired off with the Globetrotters, Hong Kong Phooey, Dynomutt, and the Funky Phantom before being taken off the air in 1981, the year that I was born. Watching this crummy cartoon felt like coming home after sojourning in a strange land.

*Godzilla* is the cold comfort of a familiar yet foreign time, when the same crises that plague us now—environmental catastrophe, intran-

sigent politicians, war—seemed smaller somehow. Is *Godzilla* worth your time? Maybe. Maybe not. What you get from it depends on what you bring, but you can't beat the price, which is free.

—Paul Thomas Chapman



## Mighty Peking Man

Shaw Brothers, a monolithic Hong Kong movie factory beloved for its kinetic, zoom-lens heavy martial arts films like *King Boxer* (1972) or *The Five Venoms* (1978), was known for its distinctive house style much like the Japanese studios were. When modernizing his company, mogul Run Run Shaw turned not to Hollywood but to filmmaking mavericks in nearby Japan. One of the first was Shin Toho cinematographer Tadashi Nishimoto who convinced Shaw to begin lensing his productions in anamorphic Cinemascope (rebranded Shawscope) just as Japan's industry had begun to.

Nishimoto trained Shaw's Chinese crews in sophisticated Japan-

*Kamen Rider* with the involvement of art director and suit modeler Michio Mikami (*Message From Space*, *X-Bomber*/*Star Fleet*). Shaw would also involve Japanese modeling staff in the following year's *The Snake Prince*, featuring a tokusatsu monster bloodbath finale.

With the ballyhoo of Dino DiLaurentiis' *King Kong* (1976), itself having almost enlisted the talents of Toho's Teruyoshi Nakano, the Shaws were keen to make a Hong Kong King Kong of their own. Originally they were planning to produce an outright remake, but this was deemed too legally risky and thus the film would become *Mighty*



DISTRIBUTOR

Arrow Video

ORIGINALLY RELEASED

1977

RUNNING TIME

90 Minutes

ers opted to hire out a full-scale Japanese tokusatsu unit.

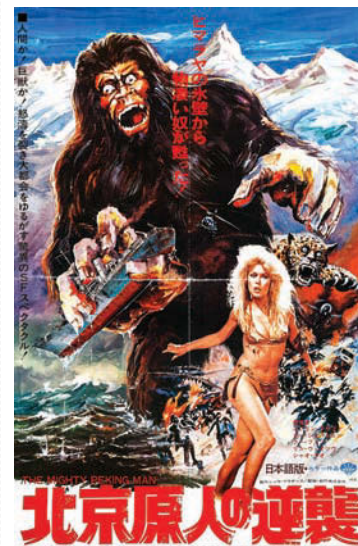
Yoshiyuki Kuroda, best known for his work on Daiiei's *Majin* films, was

initially hired as director for the special effects end. Incidentally, the Shaw Brothers had a penchant for pilfering soundtrack cues from *Majin* in their martial arts films. However, disagreements which arose over the ape creature's design and costume dragged out until the Japanese team's visas expired and Kuroda had to return to Japan. The Shaw Brothers thus hired Sadamasa Arikawa (*Destroy All Monsters*, *Space Amoeba*) as his replacement. Arikawa had been Eiji Tsuburaya's cinematographer and right-hand man and was seasoned in the knowledge of Japanese special effects. Along with him came an entirely new crew from Toho that included veteran DP Motoyoshi Tomioka, soon-to-be FX director Koichi Kawakita and pyrotechnician



ese cinematography techniques and shot a variety of Hong Kong films including King Hu's landmark *Come Drink With Me* (1966). Shaw also hired Japanese directors to helm his picture including Umetsugu Inoue, Mitsuo Murayama and Koji Shima. By his company's heyday in the mid-1970s, Shaw was eager to try his hand at a Japanese-style genre production. The first was *The Super Infra-Man* (1975), a tribute to Tsuburaya's *Ultraman* and Ishinomori's

*Peking Man*. Veteran hitmaker Ho Meng-Hua was hired to direct. He had helmed *The Flying Guillotine* (1974), a film surprisingly epochal in Greater Chinese popular culture and was likely chosen as he could handle special effects laden pictures. He had previously directed grody Southeast Asian horror efforts such as *Black Magic* (1975) and *The Oily Maniac* (1976). For shots and sequences of the film's eponymous giant ape, this time the Shaw Broth-





Osamu Kume.

Director Ho's end of the movie, shot mainly in India, features an implied interracial relationship between Danny Lee, later to appear in Woo's *The Killer* (1989) and Swiss actress Evelyn Kraft who plays a scantily clad Nordic Tarzanette. She amusingly stays in her fur bikini once the action switches to Hong Kong. Ho's crew could not tolerate the local cuisine in rural India and barely ate until they could find a Chinese restaurant. His side of the movie is marred by mondo-style animal cruelty involving a leopard with its mouth sewn shut and a love montage so goofy it looks straight from Trey Parker and Matt Stone's sensibilities. Shaw actor Ku Feng, known for his villainous roles in



martial arts movies, plays the sleazy promoter who takes the giant ape to HK. Amusingly, the British Army commander who battles the monster is played by entrepreneur and newscaster Ted Thomas, whose HK-based firm dubbed numerous tokusatsu movies into English.

*Mighty Peking Man*'s final third is more fun than Ho's exploitation-fueled end as Arikawa's tokusatsu unit takes the stage and the picture assumes a Japanese flair. *King Kong* (1933) having been one of his mentor Tsuburaya's favorite films, Arikawa and his team take the project to heart. There was friction between Ho and Arikawa; the latter feeling that he was not being given the necessary time or resources to shoot good monster footage. A high-light is a thrillingly staged aerial

battle sequence between the ape monster Utam and British army helicopters with lots of high altitude, aviator's eye view shots. These were a specialty of Arikawa, a former wartime pilot. Utam's suit was built by tokusatsu modeling extraordinaires Keizo Murase and Michio Mikami from human hair donated by local women. The creature was designed by *Kamen Rider* art director Akira Takahashi and played by Yuen Chueng-Yan, a kung fu film stuntman and the brother of famed fighting instructor Yuen Woo-Ping (*The Matrix*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*).

When it came time to shoot Utam's gruesome death as he's bloodied by explosives and set aflame atop a miniaturized replica of Hong Kong's then-tallest building the Jardine House, Yuen refused to do the stunt. Though having performed numerous dangerous stunts in martial arts movies, he was not used to the Japanese tokusatsu crew's employment of heavy pyrotechnics and felt the production's insurance didn't adequately cover it. The shoot halted for a week with the Shaws and director Ho frustrated as they had wanted to get the film out before DiLaurentiis' *Kong* hit HK theaters. As the Japanese crew's visas were about to expire, Keizo Murase thus got inside the suit where he was pelted with exploding gunpowder, set aflame and thrown off the miniature building.

Released stateside as *Goliathon*, *Mighty Peking Man* was a bigger success than *Infra-Man*, though it wound up the final Shaw production to employ tokusatsu industry ingenuity. Sadamasa Arikawa would next work on and co-direct *The Phoenix* (aka *The War of the Wizards*) in Taiwan the following year. During production of *The Snake Prince* and *Mighty Peking Man*, Keizo Murase befriended Chua Lam, a Shaw Brothers production manager who one day would be a powerful producer at Golden Harvest. The two conceived of a fantasy film to heal Japanese and Chinese divides combining the two cultures' closely-related mythologies. This project, *Brush of the Gods*, is now currently in production independently under the direction of Murase and Daisuke Sato (*Howl From the Beyond the Fog*).

—J.L. Carrozza

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11. Viz Media: Castlevania, Season 1 (1 winner), Castlevania, Season 2 (1 winner) and Naruto Triple Feature Collector's Edition (1 winner). Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd. S.H. Figuarts: Dragonball Ultimate Gohan Super Hero (1 winner) and S.H. Figuarts: Dragonball Piccolo Super Hero (1 winner). Aksys Games: Undernauts: Labyrinth of Yomi - PS5 (3 winners).

**YOU MUST ENTER TO WIN.** Fill out an entry card or the entry form on the website, mail or submit, and you're entered!



DISTRIBUTOR  
Third Window Films  
ORIGINALLY RELEASED  
1997  
RUNNING TIME  
80 Minutes

## Tetsuo II: Body Hammer

*Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* is less of a sequel to Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989) than a bigger-bud-

geted, more ambitious color remake. Tsukamoto wound up returning to the subject matter after helming the more mainstream *Hiruko the Goblin* (1990). His peers were incredulous that he was making a second *Tetsuo* film and according to Tsukamoto, he envisioned the film as more of an urban action thriller about the rela-

filmaker demanded complete creative control and liked to have his hand in every department.

Like the first film, *Tetsuo II* features a man, played by Tomorowo Taguchi, who turns into a machine. Tsukamoto's "The Guy" also returns, this time leading a gaggle of nasty skinheads who hide out in an iron foundry. The men provoke Taguchi's protagonist into killing his young son, leading to his transformation into a living weapon. Like *Tetsuo*, the protagonist and Guy do battle. Both also conclude with the transformed and merged characters rolling through the streets of urban Japan. Tokusatsu industry modeler Takashi Oka, who had worked on Tsukamoto's prior *Hiruko the Goblin*, created the film's

nightmarish moments including arresting stop motion effects throughout. The highlight is a disturbing black and white flashback sequence showcasing the protagonist's childhood trauma. Under the tutelage of a sociopathic father (Sujin Kim), he is transformed into a killing machine. Finally, he gruesomely turns on his creator.

The final reel boasts striking images as well, such as the protagonist extending pipe-like tentacles into the heads of screaming skinheads as his horrified wife (Nobu Kanaoka) looks on. The ending draws strong aesthetic influence from *Blade Runner* (1982), evoking its climactic confrontation between Harrison Ford's Deckard and Rut-



tionship between the city and the people who inhabit it, a slight shift from the body horror focus of the first. Though the budget was close to tenfold that of the original film, Tsukamoto ran out of money and wound up needing completion funds through Toshiba EMI. Toshiba EMI would offer Tsukamoto a lifetime contract to produce direct-to-video content for them, which the indie maverick would turn down. As with the first *Tetsuo*, much of Tsukamoto's crew would mutiny and leave production midway as the

gruesome prosthetics.

*Tetsuo II* is a more polished film with a stronger narrative and character development than the original. The cyberpunk sci-fi elements are defined and there's more world building. This is actually counterproductive as the original *Tetsuo* works because of its batshit insane "WTF factor" and surreal lack of a traditional narrative. *Tetsuo II*, by contrast, feels a little overthought and less cohesive and powerful. There is, however, a lot to like in *Tetsuo II* and many hauntingly

ger Hauer's Batty. *Tetsuo II* swaps out the gritty monochrome of the original for a slicker, proto-teal and orange look. This is less novel and effective and *Tetsuo II* was less well received than the original abroad, which incidentally was still in the festival circuit when the second film was being distributed. The film is still, however, far superior to 2009's awful *Tetsuo: The Bullet Man*. Tsukamoto's next stop would be the brutal boxing-based *Tokyo Fist* (1995), one of his masterworks.

—J.L. Carrozza



## Sonic Origins

A flawed collection of classics



PUBLISHER  
SEGA

DEVELOPER  
SEGA

SYSTEM(S)  
PS4, PS5 Xbox One,  
Xbox Series, Switch, PC

RATING  
E

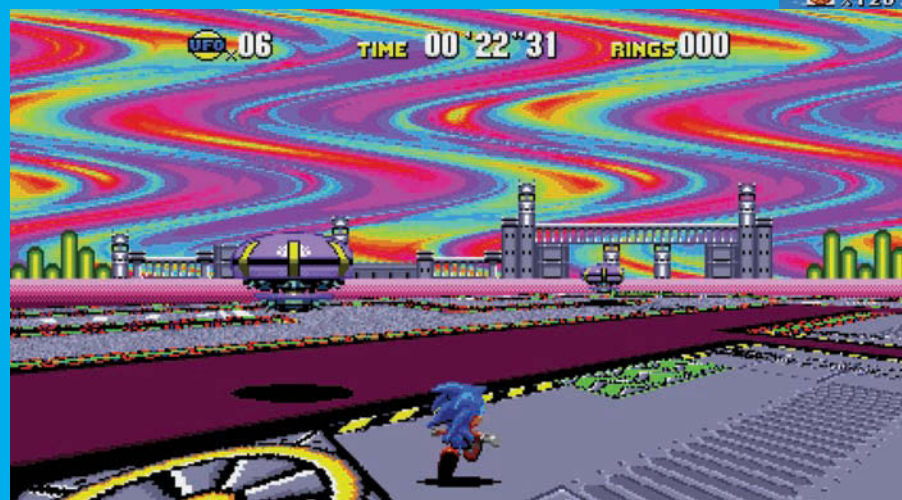
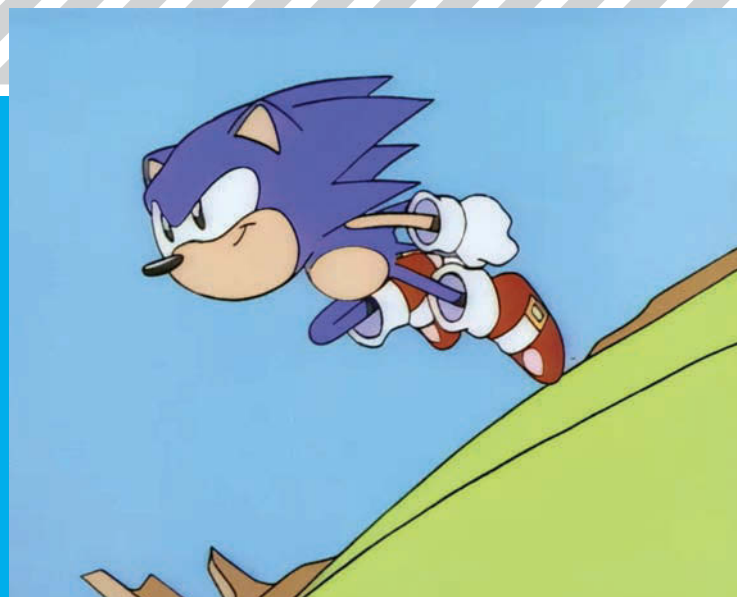
If you own pretty much any video game console or handheld—or even a phone—chances are you can find a legitimate way to play the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* games. Similarly, SEGA is always finding new ways to bring them back out for public consumption, and while it might not be the best presentation the Blue Blur has enjoyed to date, you could do worse than *Sonic Origins* if you're hard up for a new way to experience these classics.

The term “new” should be used lightly here, as the games that are included—1991's *Sonic the Hedge-*

well, there are some really weird bugs! SEGA has been paying attention to all of them, and they're not game-breaking by any stretch, but it comes off as a little sloppy when we're supposed to be celebrating an iconic series and some of the most important video games of all time.

Prior to release, the earlier digital versions of the titles were scrubbed from online storefronts in a move similar to what Rockstar did with the *Grand Theft Auto* games before releasing the remastered collection. It may make sense from a business perspective, but limiting options is never a win for the audience or preservation.

If you can get past the surface level issues at the heart of *Sonic Origins*, you'll have as good a time as possible with this release. Those who haven't already played these platformers to death will find them



hog, 1992's *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*, 1993's *Sonic CD*, and 1994's *Sonic the Hedgehog 3 & Knuckles*—are mostly how you remember them with a select few enhancements. SEGA saw fit to put all of the games on a new engine rather than go for straight emulation, which has its pros and cons. On one hand, they look great in widescreen when they aren't bugging out. On the other,

as delightful and challenging as ever, with visuals and music that have aged gracefully over the years. While I'll never be able to experience it this way myself, I'm very curious how those who have only played modern 3D Sonics would feel after being exposed to these classics for the first time. Sure, most current games have a mixture of both full 3D and side-

scrolling stages, and the recent *Sonic Mania* built upon the foundation the originals established, but there's something special about how it all began.

Unfortunately, those special aspects that turned Sonic into a household name could have used a little more love in this collection. Even 1997's *Sonic Jam* had a more interesting presentation and gim-

mick than the one in *Sonic Origins*. SEGA may be addressing some of the bugs scattered throughout, but I wish they would have spent more time turning this set into the digital museum the games within it deserve. Beyond that, it's *Sonic*, so at least you know what you're getting into if you're tempted by this legendary lineup.

—Joseph Luster



# Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak

## Rise and shine!



PUBLISHER  
Capcom

DEVELOPER  
Capcom

SYSTEM(S)  
Switch, PC

RATING  
T

*Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak* follows in the footsteps of *Iceborne* by introducing a new hub, two new areas, and a roster of new monsters to pursue. When the expansion opens, Kamura Village is finally safe, but it might not be for long.

Things kick off when a non-native monster is seen in the Shrine Ruins. After hunting it, an even more dangerous creature is discovered. Luckily, newfound friend Fiorayne helps fight it off. She says that Malzano, a dangerous beast

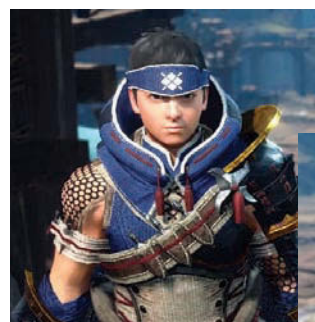
in her home Elgado, is causing unusual migratory behavior in some monsters. Fortunately for her, the hero of Kamura Village (you) is ready to take on this new challenge.

Unfortunately, *Sunbreak* takes a while to get

PC. That's right, there's no cross-save here, which is a bummer because performance and visuals on PC are significantly better.

Eventually, things pick up toward the end of Master Rank 2, and you start getting into the meat of the expansion. However, of the 17 new large monsters there are to hunt, only four are entirely original. Six of them are variations on creatures from the base game with element changes and a few new attacks. Unfortunately, most of these are sub-species of monsters I didn't find particularly engaging in their original form. The Blood Orange Bishaten, for example, just throws explosive pine cones instead of fruit and is just as underwhelming as the base version.

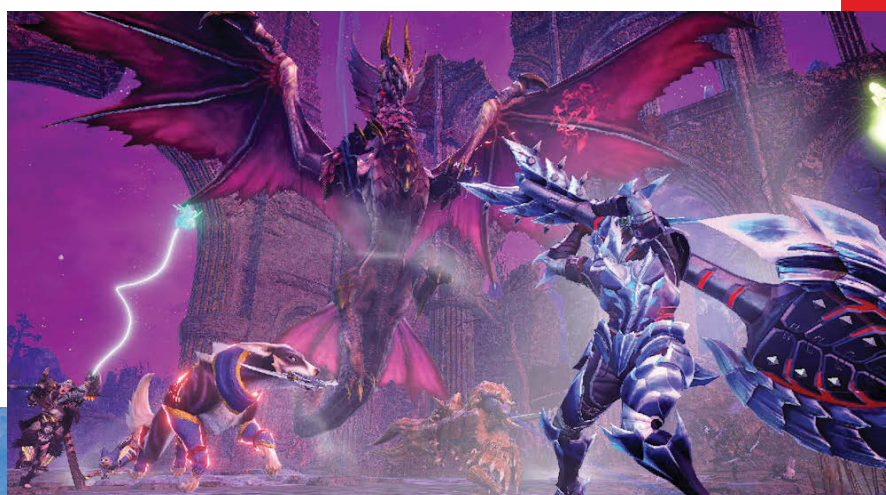
The new monsters are more interesting. Malzeno inflicts a unique status effect called Bloodblight, which drains your health and decreases the amount of healing done by items. However, it also gives you a life-stealing ability



between them at will. It gives each weapon type more versatility and opens up many new options for approaching a fight. You can also now wall-run without using the wirebug, making traversal much less stressful in certain areas.

One mechanic that *Rise* introduced that *Sunbreak* ditches are Rampages. These pseudo-tower defense segments are completely gone. However, the addition of Follower Collabs, which pair you with an NPC for a hunt, does a good job of making up for it.

*Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak* is more of the same thing for better and worse. It builds upon



to the new stuff. You only meet one new monster and one species variation in the first few hours of hunting. Additionally, the first new map, Jungle, is on the smaller side, and most of its native wildlife are creatures you've met before. The drip of new content might not bother returning fans. But, I had to play the base game again (all the way to the credits) because my original save was on Switch, and I received the review code for

that heals you with each attack you land on a foe. The other new creatures also have quirks that set their fights apart from other monsters.

Some changes and additions to gameplay mechanics also switch things up (literally). The big one is the Switch Skill Swap. This allows you to equip two sets of Switch Skills and change

the base game, which is what's expected of an expansion. However, it doesn't do much to evolve the gameplay. If you love the original, this is a must-play, but if *Rise* didn't click for you, then *Sunbreak* isn't going to change that.

—Brittany Vincent



# Demon Slayer: The Hinokami Chronicles (Switch)

## Demon slaying on the go!



PUBLISHER  
SEGA

DEVELOPER  
CyberConnect2

SYSTEM(S)  
PS4, PS5 Xbox One, Xbox Series, Switch, PC

RATING  
T

season available upon the game's debut, which resulted in my enjoying the series more than I thought I would.

Now, it's made its way to Nintendo Switch, and arguably a brand new

*Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles* made quite the splash when it first debuted across consoles and PC. It offered a slick, gorgeous way for fans of the massively popular series to experience everything that happened in the first season by way of interactive video game. It was a delight to play through, even then as a newcomer to the anime, and it rekindled my desire to watch the entirety of the

audience at that, as it's touched down on the handheld/console hybrid. And even though it's on an arguably lesser system that doesn't have as much horsepower, this is still very much a must-play for *Demon Slayer* fans or



even those looking for their next gaming-centric anime fix.

If you're unfamiliar with the *Demon Slayer* narrative, this game explores a good portion of the series' first season. It continues on through the *Mugen Train* movie, which allows you plenty of character growth and development, especially from Tanjiro and Nezuko. The game follows him as he completes a variety of missions and slays

# OPUS: Echo of Starsong

## Star-crossed explorations



PUBLISHER  
SIGONO INC.

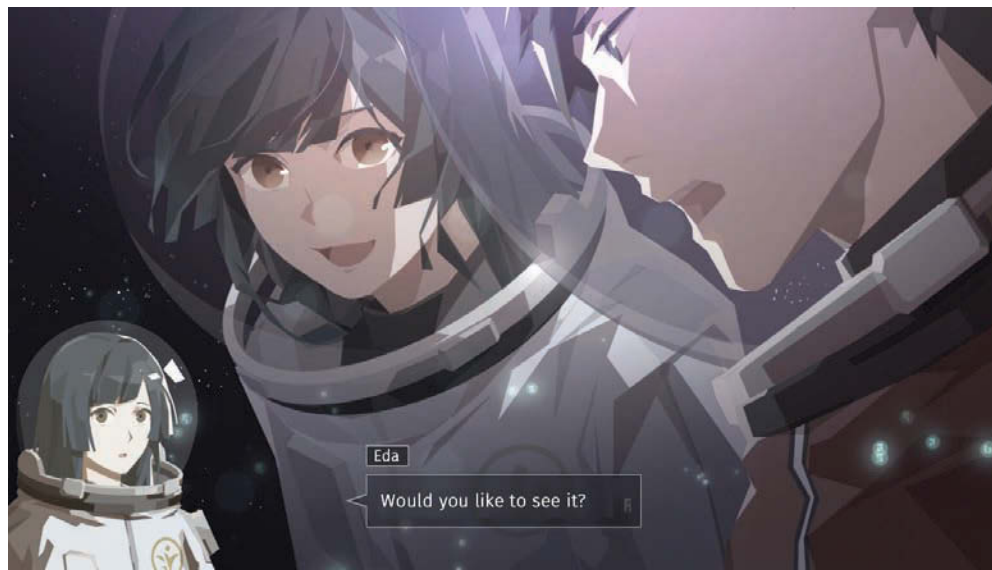
DEVELOPER  
SIGONO INC.

SYSTEM(S)  
Switch, PC

RATING  
E10+

It takes a truly special game to bring players to tears. It's not enough to have a sad ending, but a rich storyline that allows us to experience the ups and downs of our protagonist's journey—to feel what they feel. Taiwanese indie studio, SIGONO, allows us this experience in *OPUS: Echo of Starsong*. Upon first glance, this game may seem like another run-of-the-mill anime-inspired visual novel, but just within the first couple of minutes, it pulls you into a beautifully complex story.

The third installment of the *OPUS* series, SIGONO capitalized on its developers' talents and superior storytelling skills to create *Starsong*. This story begins at the end, with our protagonist searching for someone he has lost. Jun, now an old man, narrates his adventures taking place 66 years ago. The game is played through a series of flashbacks and old memories of when Jun, once a part of the noble clan, East Ocean, had been exiled. In an attempt to restore his honor, he sets off to find undiscovered asteroid caves for a special resource known as lumen to return prosper-



ity to his clan. "Lumen," akin to oil, is the source of life itself and the main resource excavated across the Thousand Peaks galaxy.

In a fateful encounter, Jun meets a witch named Eda. Witches have a special ability to find lumen through locating starsongs sealed within asteroids. Once they sense this starsong, they

mimic it by singing the same tune. This special song is then used by Jun in various puzzles within the caves.

Gameplay is made up mostly of a string of decisions. You can choose to avoid danger or pretend to be a military vessel, for example, through a luck system. Although you're not in





demons practically everywhere he goes as part of the game's story mode. With its hack-and-slash elements, it feels much more like an arena fighter in some areas instead of the RPG-lite it's built to be.

You'll control Tanjiro and explore the linear areas mapped out in front of you, completing tasks like collecting items, defeating demons, and talking to other characters to unlock new missions. It's just as flashy as the Hashira Tengen Uzui would want, but that's par for the course for modern anime adaptations. It has a lot in common with the *Naruto* games, in that you'll pull off combo attacks that eventually erupt in jaw-dropping animations that look like they could have come straight from the anime.

It's equally fun to drop blocks, parries, and

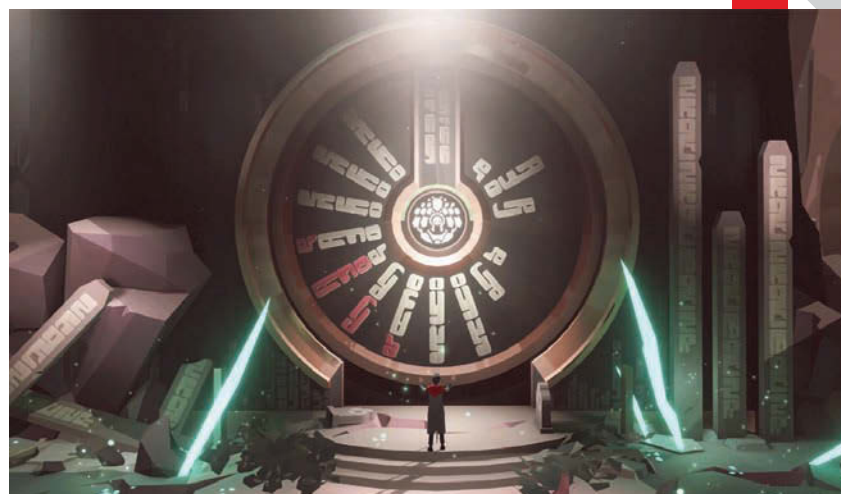
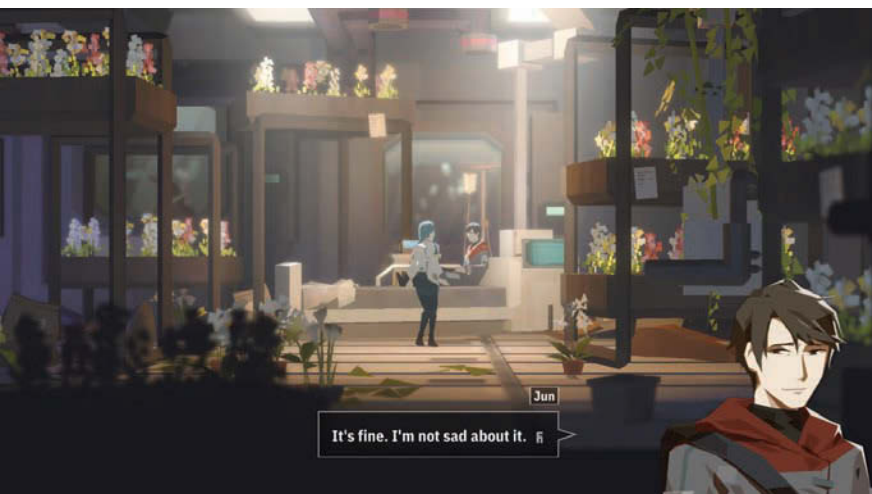
unleash a torrent of other abilities on the demons that cross your path. And while you may find that, eventually, using your special forms and techniques starts to become a little bland, you still have boss encounters to look forward to. They change the status quo considerably, and you'll have to use well-timed button presses for quick time events. Your rewards are even more striking scenes that make Tanjiro and the gang look better than they did in the anime or the accompanying film.

Working your way through the story mode rewards you with a variety of additional character unlocks, costumes, gallery images, and more. But there's plenty to do outside of the story mode, too. You can opt for versus battles, online multiplayer (when you can find an oppo-

nent), and chill out with your goodies once you've unlocked them. The story content will keep you for some time, however, to the tune of 15 to 20 hours of material.

Whether you're a huge fan of the *Demon Slayer* series or you just want something to play to tide you over after watching *Mugen Train* and *Entertainment District Arc*, you'll want to snap up *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles*. It isn't in any way marred on the Switch, and it's every bit of a fantastic play especially on the go. It may be quite a while before Tanjiro and the Demon Slayer Corps return for weekly shenanigans with us once more, but this game should be more than enough to keep you entertained in the meantime.

—Brittany Vincent



any real danger since recovering shields is easy, and if you die old Jun chalks it up to a mistake in his memory. Amidst your adventure, you will explore asteroids for goods to trade or collect materials to upgrade your ship. Doing so will grant you the ability to travel farther and sustain less damage. Aside from the visual novel aspect, you will have the chance to control Jun, Eda, and Remi on a 2.5D side-scrolling platform, adding a refreshing change to the game's pace. *Starson* offers an abundance of lore, which can be found by visiting caves, unidentified asteroids, and refueling stations. Each interaction and snippet of text, whether it's religious inscriptions or old notes from Jun's exploration, adds depth to the

story to a dizzying degree. It's a lot but makes for an immersive experience that leaves a deep impression.

In a universe filled with planetary systems, asteroid belts, black holes, and beyond, the story of a lumen-hunting crew seems insignificant, but is powerful enough to persuade me to make decisions for the good of the group. I feel a connection to the characters who deal with very human problems even in a modernized space society. With a galaxy rampant with pirates, a militarized corporation, and a brutal resource war, we see how an alternate reality to our own can very easily come true based on human history and current events.

The ending is a powerful one that reduced me to tears and deepened my understanding of some of the game's lore cleverly hidden among its narrative—it was there the whole time, but obscure enough to not spoil its secrets. Even listening to the soundtrack is enough to bring back a melancholic feeling. Rarely do I use the label "best" for games, but I feel confident in saying *Starson* has one of the best soundtracks and narratives I've come across, with gorgeous visuals to boot. *OPUS: Echo of Starsong* is a game you don't want to miss. Hopefully it will gain attention from more western players. If you play any visual novels, make it this one.

—Brianna Fox-Priest



# The Quarry

## High-quality horrors



**PUBLISHER**  
2K

**DEVELOPER**  
Supermassive Games

**SYSTEM(S)**  
PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series, PC

**RATING**  
M

*The Quarry* is a modern take on the classic summer camp and teen horror films of the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. Although I love *The Dark Pictures Anthology*, it's great to see Supermassive Games take on another AAA blockbuster horror game, and in many ways, this is a spiritual successor to the studio's breakout hit, *Until Dawn*.

Once again, we have a star-studded cast with actors like David Arquette, Ted Raimi, Brenda Song, Justice Smith, and Ariel Winter taking

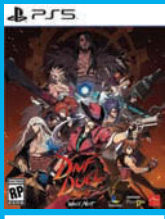
on roles. The action happens in a sleepy summer camp called Hackett's Quarry. You'll take on the roles of a group of counselors at the end of the season who get stuck at the camp one last night because of transportation issues. Unfortunately for them, that night might be the



# DNF Duel

## Welcome to the JAM

Unless you're intimately familiar with the *Dungeon Fighter Online* MMORPG—which has been



**PUBLISHER**  
Nexon

**DEVELOPER**  
Arc System Works, Eighting, Neople

**SYSTEM(S)**  
PS4, PS5

**RATING**  
T

around for 17 years and ranks among the most widely-played action-RPGs... so maybe!—you'd be forgiven for scratching your head at the initial announcement of *DNF Duel*. While the property might not be the subject matter you'd expect for your next fighting game obsession, the pedigree behind the latest spin on its world and characters is enough to make heads turn immediately. *DNF Duel* offers up a simple formula:

Take a vibrant world and a slew of attractive characters and mix them with the expertise of developers Arc System Works, Eighting and Neople for pure animated fighting bliss. And the formula totally works.

The setup is pretty straightforward to anyone who has played a fighting game from the house that cooked up the *Guilty Gear* series. The first thing you'll notice is the visual polish, with a 2.5D aesthetic that perfectly complements the roster of stylish and varied character designs.



Under that exterior is the type of nuance and depth we've come to expect from Arc System Works, and while that may be an intimidating concept, there's a lot at play here that opens the doors for newcomers and fighting game veterans alike.

On the surface, the control scheme has an intuitive setup. You have your usual strong and fierce attacks, as well as special abilities that use up magic points, powerful and dynamic moves you can trigger when your health falls below a certain threshold and more. From indi-

vidual character movesets to technical features like Guard Cancels—which, when timed correctly, essentially knock back your opponent while dealing damage and blocking their attack—and beyond, *DNF Duel* is a solid example of a fighter that does the tutorial right. Taking any individual character through training won't take up much of your time, and it's a great way to familiarize yourself with inputs and up your competitive edge. Even if you fancy yourself a button-masher at heart, you may find yourself picking up the subtleties of the combat

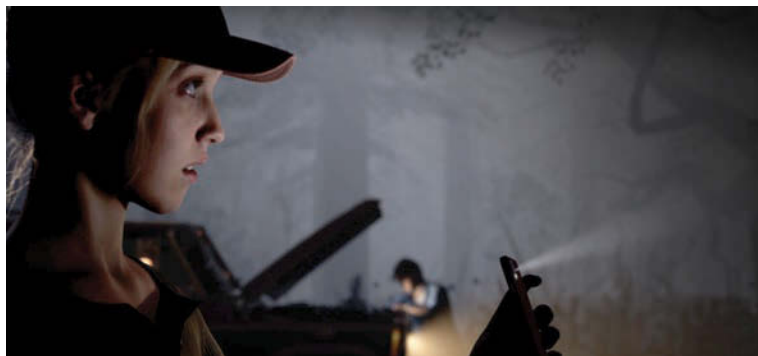


last they have to live.

The game plays out just like Supermassive's other horror titles. You'll do some light exploring, partake in the occasional quick-time event, and make dialog and action choices for whichever character you're playing as. You switch roles every now and then, and by the end, you'll have spent time as nine different individuals.

However, this is more of an interactive movie than a game. Therefore, you'll spend most of your time watching cutscenes. If you're a big fan of horror movies or adventure games, this'll be great. However, those looking for something a bit more hands-on will likely get antsy in the long periods between playable scenes. For me, the pacing was good enough that it never felt like too much time passed between getting a prompt to do something, but it won't be that way for everyone.

The biggest issue with *The Quarry* is that it doesn't do much to innovate. It plays out much the same way that Supermassive's previous hor-



ror games did. Systems have changed in presentation, like finding tarot cards to have a future scene revealed in between chapters being much

the same as finding premonitions in *The Dark Pictures Anthology*. It's not to say I don't like Supermassive's formula, but it's starting to feel a bit rote at this point.

The exploration scenes in which you do have control of a counselor tend to be a bit slow, and the camera is awkwardly placed. It focuses on a character's upper back, and they're slightly offset to the left. I assume it's meant to feel claustrophobic, but the effect is just an awkward viewpoint that makes it hard to take in the environment. It's odd because *Until Dawn* and *The Dark Pictures Anthology* games didn't have this issue.

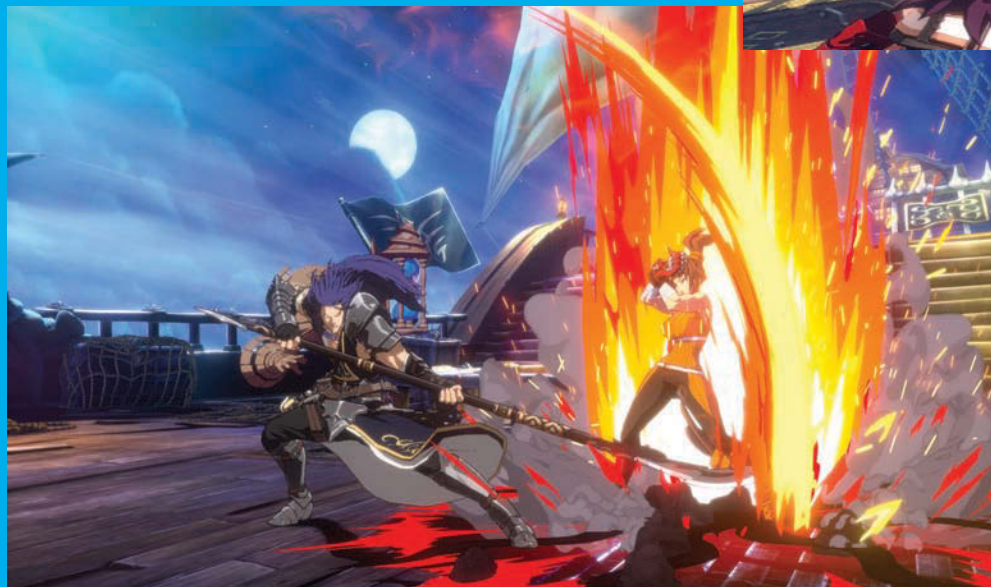
As a horror fan, I loved *The Quarry*. For all its (minor) flaws, it's still an excellent work of horror and not one that any fan of the genre should miss. The counselors' last night at Hackett's Quarry kept me on the edge of my seat for the 10 hours or so it took me to complete it, and it was worth the price of admission in my book.

—Brittany Vincent

mechanics in short order, so it's definitely worth the effort.

Thanks to rollback netcode, taking *DNF Duel* online has been a relatively smooth experience so far. Casual matches place player avatars in small rooms with a handful of arcade cabinets, putting you together with around eight or so other players and letting you spectate while figuratively placing your quarter on the cabinet to claim the next game. This is ideal if you just want to chill and play the occasional match, but wait times can be lengthy and I've been kicked out of rooms a few times while waiting for my turn. Ranked matches, on the other hand, are

much more direct. Simply set up your parameters and search for a match to take on someone of your equivalent skill level. In my case that meant getting beat up a *lot* early on, but throwing yourself in the deep end is also a viable way to learn the ins and outs of the game's systems.



With a plentiful roster that has at least a few characters most everyone will want to learn to some degree, deep and strategic mechanics and knockout visuals, *DNF Duel* is absolutely worth adding to your regular lineup of fighters. Hopefully this one won't stay too far under the radar, because it stands shoulder to shoulder with some of the more popular genre staples out there. *DNF Duel* was also previously selected as one of the official esports titles at the upcoming ARC WORLD TOUR 2022 event—which kicks off its run around the globe at the EVOLUTION CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES 2022 this August—so if you feel like taking this one pro, the opportunity is there. For everyone else, I'll see you online ... in a fierce but very casual match.

—Joseph Luster



## A Look Back!

After seven years of cosplay articles from Ani-Mia, she is taking a vacation this issue, so let's highlight some of the best cosplay photos over those years! Don't worry, she'll be back with more cosplay tips and pics next issue!

### Ani-Mia Links

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/Animia.cosplay](http://www.facebook.com/Animia.cosplay)

**Twitter:** [www.twitter.com/AniMiaOfficial](http://www.twitter.com/AniMiaOfficial)

**Instagram:** [www.instagram.com/animiaofficial](http://www.instagram.com/animiaofficial)



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Photography



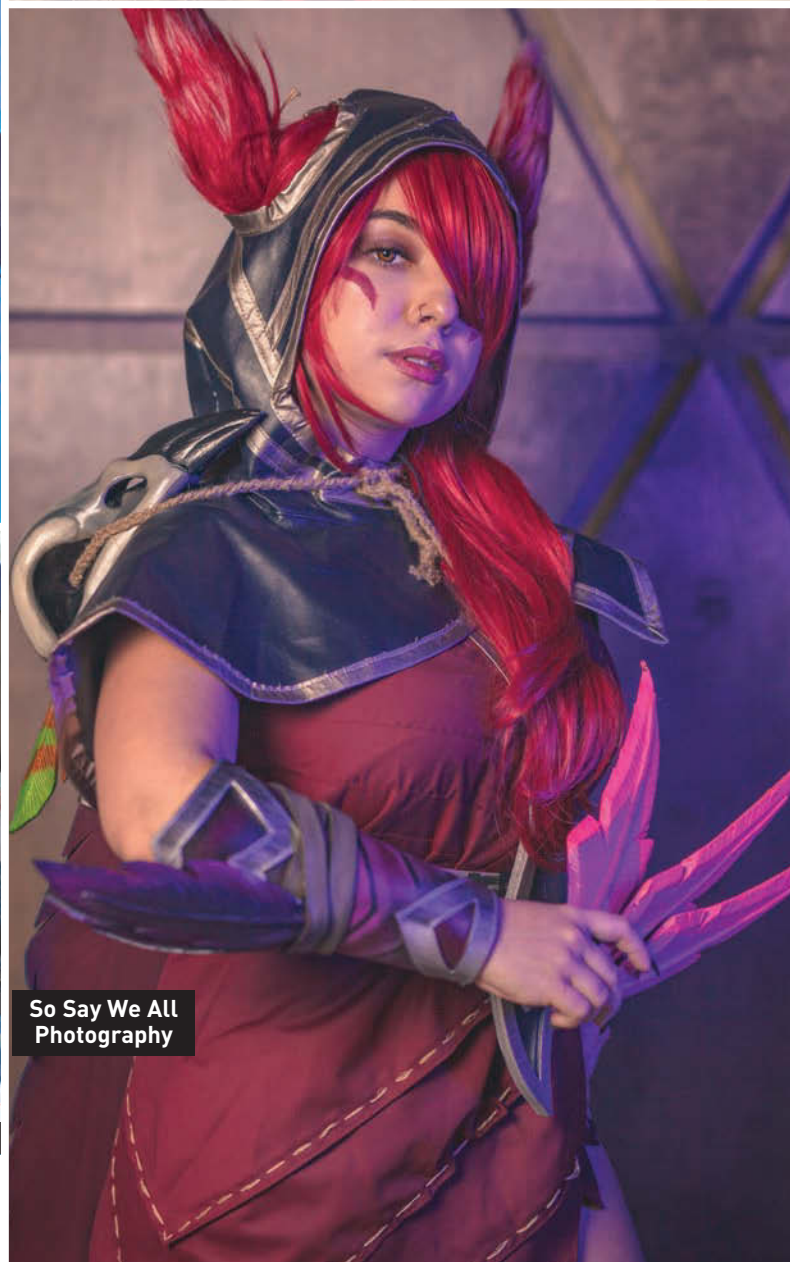
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# A More Creative World

## An Interview with Katsuya Terada

Manga creator Katsuya Terada created a variant cover for Geof Darrow's *Shaolin Cowboy: Cruel to Be Kin* issue 5, published by Dark Horse, which was revealed first at Otaku USA. On top of that, the very talented artist agreed to an interview with us about *Shaolin Cowboy*, his other work, and his philosophy on art.



**Otaku USA: How did you get involved with the *Shaolin Cowboy: Cruel to Be Kin* variant cover? How did you approach creating the cover?**

Katsuya Terada: I first became a big fan of Geof's work when I was still very young and saw his collaborations with Mœbius. Then we met in Japan a few years ago and have remained connected as friends ever since. I was honored when Geof offered me the opportunity to create a variant *Shaolin Cowboy* cover and said "YES"

thought the close-up of the face would be the most effective way to immediately contrast my style from Geof's and showcase that the cover is a variant.

**Dark Horse has also published some of your other work, such as *The Monkey King* manga and *DHorse Deluxe Journal: Terada Cover Girls*. What is it like working with them?**  
I have been working with Dark Horse Comics for

**favorite projects you've worked on?**

Personally, I do not feel I am so prolific in my art. I do appreciate that my audience feels that way, and continues to enjoy my work. But when I look at my artwork, I still find more regrets than satisfactions, more things to improve upon than be happy with. It's as if every previous work serves as a building block to make the next work better. If I had to pick, *Monkey King* will always be one of my favorite projects. I have worked in many different mediums, been published in books and featured in galleries, but *Monkey King* provided me with the clarity and strength to realize that I wanted to be a manga artist.

**Can you tell us more about your philosophy on art?**

I always consider myself as a manga artist first. What that means is my first priority when expressing my art is entertainment. When people see and experience my art I want the work to impart feelings of joy or even sorrow inside of the reader or viewer. I am always thinking about that, reexamining the way I have been expressing myself and reflecting on new ways to impact my audience.

**What would you like Western fans to know about you?**

I grew up inspired by amazing Japanese manga illustrators, as well as traditional Japanese artists like Hokusai, and also various other foreign artists like Mœbius. With so much inspiration from so many different times and places, I've come to see human expression as a wave, layering ripples from far away shores to the other side of the ocean and connecting the world. I

would be honored for my work to be seen more internationally, to inspire the same wonder I felt when I was young, and open new paths to a more creative world by expanding my audience's creative mind.

Translator: Katsu Tanaka



immediately on the spot.

Right away I knew I wanted to draw a tight closeup of his face. My first rough sketch was pretty much the same as the final version that got published, with no changes to the layout or anything. Geof's artwork emphasizes finely detailed linework on wide compositions, so I

over a decade now, and still remember how cozy I felt the first time I visited their headquarters in Portland, OR. I've had an amazing relationship with Dark Horse, and their projects are always some of my favorites.

**You're very prolific in your art. Do you have any**



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